THE VISION OF NIMROD.

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THE

VISION OF NIMROD

BY

CHARLES DE KAY

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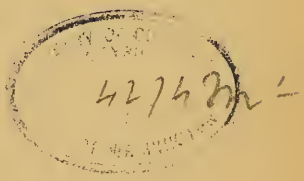

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THE PROLOGUE

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No bard of those who stirred the old glorious time,
Firdausi, Saadi, Jami the sublime,
Might chant of Gourred and her lover true
The prophet Ali. Still are rhymes to you
Grateful? Their loves that shot a deathless light
In this our century's morn through Persian night—
Like new moon with the splendid daystar blent—
Shall live in nimble numbers, nor be pent
Longer by dry historian in his tome.

The visions which these lovers far from home
Met in the waste shall us amaze and teach.
See Nimrod rise and tell the truth of each
At his old court, describe the birth of things
From soulless matter, trace through fins and wings
The breath that sways creation low and high;
Hear him rebuild the pile which should defy
The heavens, and then confess him, last of all,
Of that unhallowed flame which wrought his fall.

And after? When is told the perilous plight
Of Gourred captured, then a second night
May yield the spectre of that queen betrayed
Who Nimrod ruled.
But ere this, to my aid
Come, gentle souls, who gladly tales rehearse
In intertwined and overlapping verse!
Poets must have their audience. It behooves
Singers who fail to strike the popular grooves
To hide their lyres, nor still the people vex.

Yet question ever must the soul perplex
Of what men like, what like not. In the end
The hoot of enemy and psalm of friend
Mix to a sound confused that lasts for some
Brief space, for others after lips are dumb
Below the soil. But who knows whether he,
Or he shall live, to-day or later? See
How the broad comet awe and marvel casts,
Then is forgot. The little north star lasts.

I

THE PERSIAN REFORMERS

I

THE PERSIAN REFORMERS

THE dusk lies thick upon the deep-grooved river
Where Babylon once stood in all her pride;
Up from the waste there runs a lonely shiver;
A jackal prowls across the desert wide.
On a strange peak are men. Two forms are sitting
Motionless, black, as if engraved in stone;
Dumb since the lapwings to their nests were flitting,
Still while the owl was quavering forth his moan.
Whose are these figures two
Sombre of hue?

"Freedom to love!" Was theirs that plaintive strain
Piercing the shades that over Asia quivered?
Birds at the omen stir, yet grasp again
With trembling feet the branches of a shivered
And desperate tree, whose gaunt roots to the side
Of ruins on the barren mound are clinging.
Who could house there? Who was the mourner sighed
About the hour when the great bats go winging
Slower their sated flight
Through the brown night?

Whom his grief chokes and silent wrath convulses,
With chin on breast, buried in hopeless thought,
Has Ali for his name. The gentler pulses
Stir in a lady so celestial-wrought
In face and figure that admiring kindred
Long long before had given her for name
Gourred-oul-Ayn, Rest of the Eyes. That hind'red
Nothing that soon they cast her words of shame!
Fickle are men and swift
Their grace to shift,

And where their love was great their hate is bitter,
As sweetest milk soon turns to sourest whey;
So where with flowers the jungles loveliest glitter
There poisons linger deadliest by the way.
Who stands so firm, that sometimes he has not
Felt faith, truth, hope, earth, solid rock dissolving,
Felt that a sneering god has laid a plot
To break his victim on the slow-revolving
Wheel of the groaning years
With blood and tears?

Since the last glimmer of the sun down rushing
Ali had lain and wrestled hard with gloom;
Within his brain was night like blackness crushing
The last of light before the day of doom.
But on his face the eyes of that sweet woman
Were tenderly and most divinely bent,
While through her heart a gust of superhuman
Clean passion for her sorrowing comrade went;
Then did he know great calm
Flow from her palm.

"Nokteh," she said, and laid her smooth, warm fingers
Upon the knotted hands that fiercely burned,
"Nokteh," she pleaded, "Heart of Truth, why lingers
Dumbness so obstinate and so unearned?
Speak; let your words, fruitful as citron flowers,
Bloom from strong soil about my listening ear;
Speak; let your wisdom like the autumnal showers
Rain on the desert of your silence drear.
Better may two sustain
Pleasure and pain."

Then from recesses of his laboring chest
Came a slow sigh, of grief as he were dying,
Yet answer made to her benign request
Happier in tone, but woeful still replying:
"Gourred-oul-Ayn, I am not selfish-sad.
But oh, the doubt that has come roaring, surging
About my heart had almost set me mad,
All else in seas of horror deep submerging,
When your sweet dove-like hand
Told me of land.

"'Tis you I grieve for, O my matchless Gourred!
I cannot bear remember it was I,
I, guilty wretch! with whom away you hurried;
For me, an outcast through the world you fly;
You hear affronts and undergo temptations,
Daily you bear the Mollah's learnèd prate;
This very day the latest of our stations
Exposed you to the insult of the great,
Offering their gold for love
To the white dove.

"You could aim high. Did not that Jewish malice
Called Hand-of-Sultan promise you a seat
Second to none at Stamboul in the palace
If on his camel you would cross your feet?
It is too much. You were a Moslem woman
Born to the veil, to couches, slumbrous ease,
Meant with a nod a host of slaves to summon
And make your master but the first of these:
Gourred, I have too long
Done you great wrong!

"What though my writings hide beneath a mass
Of flowery verbiage the great news we offer.
Our foes are keen, and, as in river grass
The pitfall lurks for elephants, the scoffer
Has digged for us a pit. The Persian hand
Can reach thus far, although I only utter
To earnest pilgrims through this Turkish land
Truths clean as those that in the rain clouds mutter,
Facts to which Asia knew
Of old the clue.

"But fight I may not;—though another morning
Shall see us tracked, made captive, led in chains,
Though violence follow swiftly on the warning
We had to-day from him, who but refrains
His stroke one hour to strike more certainly . . .
Outcast and fugitive, what arduous duties
Are these you share! What pardon can there be
If lawless men should shame your glorious beauties
When the next sun shall reign
O'er this old plain?"

Over his lips another hand came sliding
  Gentle as south winds on the myrtle boughs,
Then in a voice, mellow in words of chiding,
  Gourred her passion on his brow bestows:
"Pride of my life, know it was not your beauty
  That drew me on; no, nor your manly form;
The choice it was of more than one great duty
  Which in this world I live but to perform.
    Yours I resolved to be,
    Eternally—

"Why?—were there not men richer, manlier, fairer,
  Who longed and sighed this frame of mine to win?
Ay, but like you which one of all was sharer
  Of wealth so pure and jewel-like within!
'Twas your star soul, your planet mind, O Sayid!
  Drawing me on with such resistless might
As moves gazelles, when they by streams have playèd,
  Suddenly toward the waste to wing their flight.
    Sayid, my desert's green
    Where you are seen.

"Oh, how this woman's life of mine is fragrant
With honor, Sayid, since I came with you!
A doer of good, a teacher, though a vagrant;
Once a lost flower that in the canebrake grew.
By this the harem with its dreary vices
Had made of me a tyrant and a slave,
A wretch whose body with its charm entices
A spouse allowed another's love to crave!
From that corrupting den
You drew me then

"When I the dust of my own door shook off
And made with you from that time forth my dwelling,
Vowed that no hardship, woe, nor want, nor scoff,
Nor crime of man, my maiden thoughts dispelling,
Should break our faith, or block our chosen path.
Though you foretell, O greatest of all minds!
That we shall perish by the mole-eyed wrath
Of men whom selfishness forever blinds;
Still, till that time shall come,
You are my home."

Up toward the stars their hands her comrade lifted
And cried: "Ye steadfast, that do yonder shine,
If you have strength, let upon her be sifted
Such even happiness as ne'er was mine!
Chase from the hearts of men those evil tenets
Taught by a seer who fell before a jinn;
The race this lady runs, O let her win it,
And save this nation from its cancerous sin;
Deaden Mohammed's name
With his great shame!

"He, my great forefather in race and mind,
Swerved from his path, the lusts of flesh obeying:
He his own conscience and his friends would blind
With forms of prayer, with silly fasts, which, preying
On the firm flesh, left souls as foul as ever.
Scarce to his Paradise the tender race
Of helpful women reach through strong endeavor.
Tyrant, he scorned the weak; he lacked of grace
And meanly humbled those
Through whom he rose!

" But may you, Gourred, see life's utmost station,
When that which Frankish hypocrites pretend
Shall really be throughout the Persian nation.
Then veils and harems all shall be at end;
Woman shall stand in sunlight, modest, honored;
Shall freely choose one mate to be her own;
Then she that falls is openly dishonored,
But she that keeps her pure and clean is known.
Not, as behind one screen,
Clean and unclean.

" But I have news, O comforter in sorrow!
Hidden from you, because you are so dear;
Yet I must tell it, lest a sneer to-morrow
From cruel foes shall drive you to despair.
Our Boush-Reweeyêh—whom I made the Gate
Wherethrough the faithful to our doctrines enter,
The learnèd doctor, the wise man of state,
The nearest yet to me, who am the Centre—
Tempted by hates abhorred,
Has drawn the sword.

"In lieu of peace he offers war. Alas!
On threatening Moslem curses he bestoweth.
No longer meek, unhinderable as grass,
In humblest guise the patient way he goeth.
So fell Mohammed. Ah, he would be founder
Of temporal realms for me the prophet high!
He would be conqueror, would he? not expounder
Of creeds that raise men from their misery!
Blood, Gourred, has been spilt.
Ours is the guilt.

"Ay, hide your face, poor man-deceivèd lady,
The worst draws nigh. For though all Persia's head
Is careless or for Koran or for Kadi
And scorns whate'er the greatest prophet said—
Buddha, Mohammed, Moses, gentle Christ—
Still, when reform attacks a Moslem tenet,
He will be quick the Mollah's cry to list,
Nor can the pureness of our dogma screen it,
Nor us our holy zeal
From his cool steel!"—

"Peace, let it come!" spoke out that trusty spirit.
"We've done our best; what more is there to say?
If neither Shah nor people see the merit
Our creed contains, 'tis time we went our way.
But do not groan for me. What thing am I
To cause in you so deeply sad a feeling?
I live to please you, not alarmed to fly
Dangers real, fancied, perils that come stealing
O'er a mind, as when stars
An earthmist mars.

"Ah, can you dream that I should cease," cried Gourred,
"From aiding you upon this mission high?
If for one hour I keep you from that worried,
Sad, hunted look gazelles have when they die,
I am repaid! O Ali, I'm your brother,
Sister and wife, your father, race and town,
And mine it is, O prophet pure, to smother
A little of the woe that weighs you down;
I, not so strong as you,
Yet am more true.

"List to my parable: These hawthorns staunch
That lean apart, that storms still more may sunder,
What though the raven croak within their branch?
Far down below, the rocky mound soil under,
Their roots have gripped about the self-same stones.
Soft in the twig, their slanting trunks are harder,
But on their wrapped and married roots cyclones
May pour their fury! All that envious ardor
Serves but to steel the more
Their pith, their core.

"Such is our fate; consider! You did rightly
To break away from that lone citadel
Where foes and friends supposed you poring nightly
O'er themes of life to come in heaven or hell.
Why should not we ourselves advance the church?
We, making converts 'mid these pilgrims zealous,
Hasten the day that triumph boldly perch
Upon our faith, when Moslemin most callous
From their old rotten creed
Joy to be freed.

"But if we must die, let us die together,
And, ere we go, further your god-sent work,
Loosing, as camels from a cruel tether,
The wives of Iran who in harems lurk.
Oh, that a man should imitate the beasts
That chew the cud—their lusts forever sating!
The ancient king who lorded o'er these wastes
Was humbled to an ox the marsh-grass eating,
Because his heart within
Reeked with that sin.

"Yes, to this day in all these cities men
On cheek or forehead bear a scar assignant
Of God's displeasure. That strange mark of wen,
Those scars in shape of date and sores malignant,
What mean they, save that for some centuries
Doom is deferred? To-morrow in his ire
Floods may dislodge them from their seats of ease;
Like windfall figs they may be drowned in mire;
Lightning may leave no trace
Of their lost race.

"My friend and husband, lord, and only master,
Be comforted, blows could not drive away
Your Consolation-of-the-Eyes; disaster,
Hunger, nor thirst shall her firm soul dismay;
But speak again, for on this mound is brooding
I know not what of ghostly and of strange;
A chill expectancy itself obtruding
As though it came from past our human range!
Closer! oh, clasp me tight
Against this fright!"

II

THE VISION OF NIMROD

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THE VISION OF NIMROD.

No sun, no moon. Northward the star Orion,
The star of Nimrod, had the zenith won,
When from the waste the roaring of a lion
Boomed like the bursting of a signal gun.
They saw with fright the even dusk of night
Roll to a shape, black on the starlit heaven,
And lo, a Lion of enormous might,
Shadowy, shaggy! From his jaws of ravin
Issued the awful sound
That shook the ground.

And as they gazed, speechless with mortal terror,
It took new form like ocean's clouds at morn;
The lion changed;—that surely was no error
Which saw a bull shaking his dreadful horn?
But hardly of the new shape were they 'ware
When the brute's head of him so fiercely charging
Turned human; a grave face with curling hair,
Its ordered locks on breast and back discharging,
Loomed through the dusky night
And stayed their flight.

Then from the face, locked with a steadfast meaning
Upon their eyes, the shape took change and flow,
And lo, a giant on a war-club leaning,
Lifted on high, held the dark plain below.
Purple and golden on his stalwart shoulders
His garments lay, but spotted all and torn,
Like robe that long in royal cavern molders;
And round his neck upon a chain was worn,
Like a strange cross to see,
An amber key.

But all that coat, by tooth of time corroded,
  Was full of eyes and little crescent moons
And peaches over-ripeness has exploded—
  Pomegranates cloven by a score of noons.
The war-club whereupon his left hand rested
  Was scaly like a pinecone huge in size;
Against those two his shadowy bulk he breasted
  And with his right hand pointed toward the skies.
    Then in a voice of dread
    Croaking, he said:

"Barbarians! Once, with sages of Chaldee,
  I, Nimrod, watched upon a tower's back,
Marking the planets creep most cunningly
  A pinnacle past, which sharply cut their track;
Methought this arm, that was all rigid grown
  With following slow their motions wise and stealthy,
Grew boundless large, reached upward to yon sown
  Broad field, the sky, with red ripe star-fruits wealthy,
    Plucked and consumed them still
    At my fair will!

" 'Twixt Kaf and Kaf, those hills that wall the world,
My body stretched, and from my heaving breast
The streams of breath, against the hard sky hurled,
Were turned to clouds that veered at my behest.
Anon the horizon with sharp white was lit
And by that glare the veil of things was riven ;
The door to strange new lands was suddenly split,
As if I, earth, had caught a glimpse of heaven.
I saw how great that bliss,
How petty this !

" That was the hour of evil fates descending;
From that strange night I was not merely man:
Where'er I marched crowds must be still attending
Me, the great midpoint of the earthly plan.
Euphrates was the life-blood of my heart ;
Tigris a vein that throbbed with ceaseless motion ;
In me the firs of Ararat had part
And I was earth, air, fire and boundless ocean !
Folly from that black day
Held me in sway.

"From Ur the town I marched with vainness blinded
And founded empires in the teeming plain;
Lured to revolt ten cities fickle-minded,
And dared the gods that could not save their slain.
I was their god. I was the lord of all,—
Each step a new town or a plundered palace.
I drowned a land with break of water wall;
Repeopled it, when kindness grew from malice.
Who reckoneth all my crimes?
He falls who climbs.

"Of Babylon I made the stateliest city
The earth has yet upon its surface known.
Nation I fenced from nation without pity
That all might wend toward Babylon alone.
Tribe might not trade with tribe, nor north with south,
But all must barter at my market centre;
Nor eastman speak with westman mouth to mouth
Unless they first within my limits enter.
Thus grew each tongue and art
Slowly apart.

" But my own folk and all the priestly pack
Grew fat with passage of the tribes deceived.
Shameless were they; they tolled from every sack,
From each exchange a shameless moiety thieved.
Shrewdly the dialects could they translate
And turn each service to a wicked profit.
Still was their care the tongues to separate;
At dullness in their victims still they scoffèd,
But I, to see them plod,
Jeered all as god.

" A vulture was my crest, with locust pinions;
Soon the unhappy tribes its meaning found.
No signs of life my warriors left. My minions
Seized, slew, burnt all or stamped into the ground.
Less wise, more fierce than Kush, my glorious father,
I heeded not the locusts' after state:
They waste and rot, but the sick remnants gather
And seek bare heights ere that it prove too late.
Men, locusts—wheat or chaff—
The grim stars laugh.

"Wastes are the home of flowers most aromatic ;
Gums, savory fruits, grow from a rocky ground ;
Arabian plains, wild deserts Asiatic
Perfect a steed nobler than masters found.
Ah, had I fled this folk, these plains luxurious,
Reta'en the antique cliff homes of my stock,
Prosperity would not have turned me furious,
A sounder brain withstood the triumphal shock!
The flaming stars were wroth ;
They lured their moth.

"Among the peaks that round my fathers glistened
Men are more godlike though their wealth be small.
Would to my guardian spirit I had listened
And turned me east, back to the world's great wall!
Then had I lived a life of hardy leisure,
With time to think, to govern well and brood
On those high thoughts which form the only treasure
That is not time's or swift corruption's food :
Perhaps till these last days
I should have praise.

"But, spite of crimes, spite of my wealth and glory,
Of me what know ye, men of a puny age?
I am a rumor, an uncertain story,
A vanished smoke, a scarce-remembered page!
The angry peoples showed they could be kinder
To my great fame than after-following kings,
For hate still kept a little sour reminder
When every mark of me had taken wings.
Whate'er on brick I traced
My sons effaced.

Yes, my own sons, for whom I bear these curses,
Melted my statues, overturned my grave,
Hammered from living rock the deep-hewn verses
That from oblivion my vast fame should save.
Thrice was this mass of brickwork, seamed with ravage,
All newly builded by succeeding kings:
What of the rage of desert-dwelling savage?
From sons a treachery far deeper stings!
Every one hundredth year
Some man must hear,

"Must hear how they betrayed me, yes, and ponder
O'er my great crimes, my splendor and my fall,
How messengers from some great godhead yonder
In vain approach, Nimrod from sin to call.
I know not who he is, foretold by many,
For on my mind weighs a thick cloud of doubt,
Like fogs across these barren plains and fenny,
So fertile once, they laughed at want and drought.
List, though you shrink with fear,
Tremble, but hear!"

How can be told the terror and the quaking
Which on those lovers fell, when first they heard
The giant spectre his confession making
With many a groan and heart-confounding word?
But Gourred, in the warm embrace of Sayid,
Was first to dare and whisper him of cheer,
Whereat he, too, waxed firm and undismayed.
"Nimrod," he cried in accents bold and clear,
"Tell on, thou hapless ghost,
All thy great boast!"

The spectral limbs of him his lot complaining
  Grew denser as to lesser size he shrank.
Then a rough voice to gentler accents training,
  His centuried silence to those hearers frank
With joy he broke. Beneath his stark arms fluttered
  The windy robes that foglike round him swept
Ever as still his ordered speech he uttered;
  Thus, while the two closer together crept
    Fast, like a ship's blown sail,
    Ran the strange tale.

III

AHRAM FOUND

III

AHRAM FOUND.

"Long, O barbarians, is my wordy story,
For great the events which crowded all my reign.
What though my path became less rude and gory,
Still to the highest I did not attain.
Wherefore my station, nor divine, nor human,
Is now to live a dreadful death in life;
Nor yet a shade, nor given the strength to summon
Myself once more to actual mortal strife:
Where, o'er the sea of sand,
Dust pillars stand

"There do I whirl upon the parched wayfarers
A writhing form whose head is hid in cloud,
Whose pitiless skirts have never yet been sparers
Of aught alive they caught within their shroud;
But when the caravan lies deeply buried
Beneath the wide folds of my sandy cloak,
With a small mouth I slowly drain the worried
Still-pulsing hearts of men whom pebbles choke,
Ever to mortal brood
Linked by that food;

"And ever doomed to still repeat the action
Which most I loathe, bewail and now lament.
I have no choice. An unwithstood attraction
Forces me slay the men whom wastes have spent.
Thus do I torments suffer far more horrid
Than those of spirits that are burned in hell;
They purge them of their sins in caverns torrid;
I, ever sinning, with fresh crime must dwell,
Smirched by an endless flood
Of guiltless blood.

"Yet fear not me. The day that in ascendant
That star is found named after me on high
I know my crimes, I seek a true descendant
Of ancient seers, and him with words I ply.
So that he learn from my unholy doings
The dangers of an all-too-powerful sway,
Perchance the good of my heroic ruings
May slowly leak into the wide world's day.
Sayid, remember well
All I shall tell!

"Earth grew too small for me; I dared high heaven,
And soon a chariot, cunningly made light,
Stood yoked to eagles ready to be driven
From earth on mighty wings in all men's sight.
I took my seat. The eagles all, unhooded,
Arose as if to meet the ascending sun;
But when so grievously they felt them loaded,
This way and that the coward birds did run.
Out was great Nimrod thrust,
Rolled in the dust!

"Then who durst laugh? Only my runners trusty
Whispered, that far in Ararat a tribe
Of low-born shepherds mocked my journey dusty
By falcons loosed with gross and shameful gibe.
Wherefore I drew my myriad host together,
And northward marched in silent, boding rage;
Hemmed in that folk so close, not even a feather
Could slip from out my crafty-latticed cage.
Savage and grim they fought,
But all were caught.

"Some to the block, some for the flames elected,
Some to the lake, some to a living grave;
The rest—men, women, and fair boys selected—
Were southward haled for me and mine to slave.
Upon our march one stalwart captive ever
Freshened the sad and cheered with counsel wise,
Taught where to dig to find the vanished river,
Read words of comfort on the star-sown skies:
Ahram this leader's name;
Great was his fame.

"Him did I mark for death, a victim curious
For that grim god who haunts Euphrates' plain,
Him did I honor with a robe luxurious,
Spices, wine, gold—eunuchs, a prince's train.
Still by my stealthy gifts he would not profit
But parted all among his suffering kin;
Held to his folk more ragged than a prophet;
Marched in their ranks, haggard, but clear from sin.
Ahram at my right hand
I caused to stand.

"'Ahram,' I cried, 'what haughtiness of spirit
Bids you contemn the gifts I deign to cast?
Have you no care my gracious smile to merit?
Do you not know this hour may be your last?
Say that you live, say that I curb my anger,
Soon may a life snap like a weaver's thread;
Brittle as whirling wheels that burst with clangor
How soon may not your stubborn soul have fled
And with regretful shriek
The dead land seek?

" ' Wherefore it seems the part of one so wise
To seize the momentary chance-flung pleasures,
Stand by my chariot in a prince's guise,
Help to crush nations and divide their treasures!
Born to command, what strange and childish folly
Weds you to rags and this poor broken tribe?
Shake off, shake off unmanly melancholy
And be my captain, vizier, priest and scribe—
Else, lest too much be said,
Look to your head!'

" ' Nimrod,' quoth he, 'within the stars 'tis written
How things shall terminate 'twixt you and me.
You fatten me to form a victim, smitten
For some vile god, bred of the tropic sea!
But for that god I shall not die. I know
Too much of heaven and earth, the spirit land,
Of dreams and portents and the murmurs low
From magic trees, of jinns to deserts banned.
Your hand shall you refrain,
As from your brain!

"'Without me vain will be your vast endeavor,
But my strong aid all demons shall outwit.
Your sons, without me, shall establish never
Your royal line, nor in your chariot sit.
Save me, who knows the rules whereby assemble
The fateful stars that sway a nation's birth?
Save me, who reads the meaning of each tremble
Within the heart of earthquake-shaken earth?
Gems are but mud; I own
Wisdom's great stone!

"'Nimrod,' he spake, 'know you what means the name
Of Hero, and what fame the man inherits,
Who wins thereto through paths devoid of blame,
And gains therewith reward for lofty merits?
I am a Hero, not the same that you
Have reached by conquests of surrounding nations,
But one who's lord in realms withdrawn from view
And makes clean victories by his godlike patience.
Angels by him are seen
Glorious of mien;

"'And all the past and all the terrible future
Are known to him, darkly, yet far more clear
Than e'er to priests who on your altars butcher
Cattle or slaves that omens may appear.
My knowledge now all other men surpasses
Save two great seers, bowed by unkindly time,
Who sit unmoved within the Eastern passes
Of Caucasus, their beards congealed with rime;
They from disdain of speech
No more can teach.

"'And would you know who are the earthly heroes?
Then seek the hater who controls his soul.
What brow was calm, the day the whelming sea rose?
Within what breast do triple lifebloods roll?
Know you the man can lay his hand in passion
Upon a bride, and yet from her refrain;
Who, full of hot desires, can daily fashion
His tongue to virtue and his flesh to pain?
One who affronts affairs—
Never despairs?

"'Nimrod, the hero's not his own self-maker,
He comes resultant from a thousand things.
The anxious potter is a frequent breaker
Of jars. Too seldom one is found that rings
Perfect, and stands all sound and deftly painted.
Just so obscure must families pass away
Before one man is found in nothing tainted,
Before their heaping virtues in one clay
Meet—and some lucky morn
A hero's born!

"'Sad is that land where sons with foreheads brazen
Withstand their fathers, and forget the meed
Of service to the mother hands that chasten
Their foolishness and froward wills at need.
Great though the boasts of long-descended princes
Their claims are worthless, saving when the folk
Tables them in their hearts, and all evinces
That love, not force, has kept them in their yoke.
Only the house that's pure
Long can endure.

"'Now if we owe to our divine ancestors
The larger good which comes to us at birth;
But to base parents half the sin that festers
Within our breasts—much in a narrow girth—
Whom shall we worship soonest, whom embellish
With choicest gifts, though only a name remains;
Whom shall we feast, in hopes that they may relish
Elixirs pressed from sweet and wind-blown grains?
To the good parents' shade
Hymns should be made

"'And costly statues to such chiefs erected
As made men by their works more glad and wise.
They from the great the lowly have protected,
Have been the loftiest in a humble guise.
But as to gods—what know we of their favor,
Hatred or scorn, their attributes or forms?
Is not the human heart the true enslaver
Of destinies, the raiser of all storms?
Dumb, with unselfish ways,
Give the gods praise!"

"'Beware!' I cried, 'tempt not the gods, O Ahram,
Though you be wise surpassing man's degree!
Great are the dead, but fearful the alarum
That sounds when demons rise revengefully.
What harm can come from my august ancestors?
But dreadful is the sting that dragon wields
Who wallows in the mighty swamp, and pesters
The slaves who till my rich rank southern fields!
Surely you work, as priest,
Magic at least?'"

"'Magic,' quoth Ahram, 'has its sovereign uses;
But if, so fond, of wizard craft you crave,
I can expound its good and its abuses:
Witchcraft is not for kings, but for a slave.
Have patience, Nimrod; if I seem obscure,
It is my tongue that silence long has swollen;
It is my brain which has not pictured sure
Dim phrases from my soul too early stolen.
Trust through each new surprise
Me, who am wise!'

"Yet more he spake. But I took little profit
In words like those; yet, won by slow degrees,
I raised so high the leather-jerkined prophet,
He stood erect when all men bowed their knees.
Our converse was of matters great; as, wonders,
Quick flights of birds, strange tracks within the sand,
Omens low muttered in the speech of thunders,
Dull sounds perceived by them in mines that stand,
Stars that have rolled the same
Years without name.

"Down the great stream now altered and deserted
Floated for many a day our royal raft;
The while the slaves my braves with dance diverted
Ahram exposed to greedy ears his craft;
But when within the blooming banks we entered
Of vast canals around great Babylon,
My thoughts, my heart on Ahram all were centred;
About his loins I cast my regal zone;
Upon his thumb I thrust
My ring of trust.

"Listen the tale which Ahram oft recited,
Which I have oft, in these sad centuries,
Retold to prophets shuddering, yet delighted.
Better have spoken to the passing breeze!
Too dull, too slothful, they have feared their fellows;
They dared not to the sneering world repeat
What they had learned. They trembled at the billows
Of vulgar bigotry! Or priest, or state,
Awed them with threats of shame,
Tortures, the flame.

"But listen, ye! Perhaps the spark of rigor
Is not all dead that once through Asia ran;
Perhaps, to free yourselves, you may find vigor
To oust the impostor with his Alcoran.
Receive from Ahram, then, his best possession
Deep and abstruse, for overthrow of sin.
Ponder it well. Here is the root-confession.
Thus Ahram saw the forming of the jinn.
Strain on my face your eyes;
Peace, and be wise!"

IV

THE TARN OF KAF

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"'FAR in the east where sacred hills aspire,
Which you call Kaf and earth's most distant rim,
Hides among cliffs that soar like frozen fire
A hollow vale. Up to its ragged brim
Are awful shapes pictured in solid stone
Of every live thing which the soil has gendered;
But to the vale such souls can pierce alone
As those whom years of self-restraint have rendered
Simple and sanctified,
Devoid of pride.

"'Such was I once, such hope to be, O Nimrod!
And that is why, taught by an aged seer,
I passed the shadowy straits and trod the dim road
Of that gray vale deep in the crags austere.
Alone I marched, bearing for every weapon
One word upon my tongue, a word of might,
A little word, which, said aright, will deepen
The sun by day and lame the wings of night!
Down through those shapes rainworn
I strode forlorn.

"'On me from dim and time-bleared eyes they smilèd;
They grinned with mouths cracked by a million years;
They could not speak, nor did they move an eyelid,
And yet I saw their hatred, knew their jeers,
And slowly, slowly felt my footsteps lagging
The while a thought stirred in my trembling hairs
How in my heart the life was oozing, flagging,
Was giving way to stony veins like theirs;
Fear made my brain so numb,
My lips were dumb.

"'For scarce the first great terrace had I threaded,
Wheneas a longing quenchless-deep I knew
To take my stand amid the figures dreaded
Which, grim and sneering, from the rockbed grew.
It seemed so wise to change the heat of toiling
For cool hard veins like theirs, for dreams divine!
To know all things aright without once soiling
A finger in life's filth! to watch the brine,
But never long to taste
The bitter waste.

"'Never round me shall close such heavenly mansion
Of wisdom, as at touch of magic wand,
Never again arrive the wide expansion
Of brain that went with horror hand in hand.
Truly, I said, too weak to aid the living,
Too scornful of honors, I'll be rich in gain
Of wit past all! Here am I freed from giving
My hoarded wisdom back again to men;
Wrapt in my thoughts sublime,
I'll smile at time.'

"Ahram!" (I cried) "to Nimrod came that seeming.
Like you, I too believed myself divine.
A thin domain was your vast land of dreaming;
The actual world, its fields and towns, are mine.
How fared you then? was it forgot, your peril?
Did you like me give way to selfish dreams?
Speak! what rare gem of knowledge 'mid the sterile
Sheer crags of Kaf unknown, unwitnessed gleams?
Say, did you farther win
And see the Jinn?"

"'The word, O Nimrod! that was my salvation:
The name no man may utter, save when death
Stares in his face, when he that sways creation
Wills that one live, not die of what one saith.
That name is written, but in rock not graven,
Nor traced in sand, nor digged in lines of turf,
Nor built in walls, nor scrawled upon high heaven,
Nor wreathed in loops of island-fringing surf!
Down in the ocean's deep
That name doth sleep.

"'It sleeps. For though a word, it is a creature,
And, as it lies, wound in its fold on fold,
It is alive, and yet its coilings feature
The word, the name of him who is not told.
He willed, and lo! the dragon where he slumbered
Uncoiled him once, and with the movement drew
The waters from above till they encumbered
More lands, O king, than ever fell to you!
'Twas a great seer of old
Saw him unfold.

"'First came the ocean up the rivers charging
Like foaming boars resistless in their might,
And all the fields grew lakes; their brims enlarging
Drove the folk upward toward the hills in fright.
Then fell the rain—not stol'n from out the sky,
But dropt in sheer, all-overpowering masses,
And what the sea had spared the torrents ply
With hideous rush. As in the marsh the grasses
Before wild oxen stoop
The peoples droop.

"'Regard an ant-hill which a summer freshet
Surrounds at foot with ever-gathering waves.
The busy crowd that watch the floods enmesh it
Rush o'er the hill and in and out their caves.
In vain. Inexorable, the creeping waters
Climb the long slope that's now an island made;
Then of the soil those small and busy daughters
In clustering mass the flinty skies upbraid
Since, without knowing why,
They all must die.

"'Such was the fate of men throughout these valleys
And circling hills upon that day of doom,
When, at the sounding of a Name, the chalice
Of ocean overflowed, and all the gloom
Of antique night came down to double fears
In men aghast; when at old ocean's foot
Stirred the great snake that in his image bears
A hieroglyph, of human script the root;
When the stars, blanching, heard
That awful word.

"'Twas it first gave a clue to all things noted
Upon the earth by every tribe of man;
For till that day the human speech had floated
This way and that without a chart or plan.
From that time forth speech was o'er space ascendant,
And sound, though hushed, was conqueror o'er time;
Then wise men talked to their remote descendant
By graven rune, by deep and pregnant rhyme.
Nimrod, my tongue was stirred
To frame that word.

"'My lips but moved, and lo! the spell was shattered.
Light grew my feet as wings, and firm, clear-eyed,
I passed on through those statues grim and battered
And left them frozen in their sneers and pride.
Down through a beetling pass I came unaided,
Downward a perilous way from ledge to ledge
Till the broad sky had nigh to twilight faded.
Within the deep where hills together wedge
A round black tarn did stare
Dead as the air.

"'The eye of night, the womb of earth, the navel
Of teeming worlds, but lustreless and blank!
Yet, as a stone in which magicians grave all
The future dark in many an artful rank,
That tarn was pregnant with the wisdom few
Of mortal minds were ever made to cherish,
And fewer still but half suspect a clue
And key thereof; but most men blindly perish
Ignorant how they came,
Whence, for what game.

"'So there I stood, close to the very brink
Of some gray secret in that mere profound.
At what might come my flesh began to shrink;
I trembled, as the sacred planes are found
Shaking their palsied, tossing tops together
Within the hush which runs before a quaking,
When, in a sultry lull of rumbling weather,
The demons of the rock a breath are taking
Ere they together clash
With dreadful crash.

"'But down I crouched, mumbling the one word ever
With eyelids rounded on that moveless mere,
Lucid of mind, certain I would not sever
My steps from there till all things should appear.
The lake was brown and deep; it looked congealed;
But in the depth fine crystals 'gan to form
Dim, like a scattered caravan concealed
Behind the sand veils of a desert storm;
Evenly all about
Shapes started out—

"'Shapes that are not shapes, yet have life and motion,
Join and disjoin, that make each other prey,
Grow fat, absorbing by a slow attraction
The mates with whom they seem at first to play:
And, when too large, a fine wide cleft appears
Across the shadowy and unshapely masses;
They break in twain; each side his own way steers,
Then grows anew and through the same race passes.
Marvelous, of deep import,
Is that grim sport.

"'Then through the dusky wave is seen a mountain
Slowly arising in the tarn opaque,
Troubled, as if its core were all a fountain
Of rock ebullient underneath the lake.
Great shapes like flowers about its top in cluster
Sit as if quick and warmed upon a hearth;
And yet from out the rock no fiery lustre
Shines from the bowels of mysterious earth,
Neither does steam or flame
Rise from the same.

"'But as the ocean under storm and shadow
Forever changes, and the billows slant
This way and that upon their barren meadow
In answer to the east wind's varied chant,
So does the mound, those wine-brown waters under,
Glimmer and gloom with deep internal stress.
Meseems that now a great and unknown wonder
To air and sunlight is about to press.
Slight is the foremost change,
Subtle and strange.

" ' The flowery bed about the summit growing
Defines itself and sways as if it wills.
Studded with myriad threads a purpose showing,
Surely the groping mass existence fills!
Within the breathless lake they raise fine currents
Upward and downward, till the solid mere
Seems, having lost its former still endurance,
To suck down bubbles from the atmosphere.
So is the dry rock fresh
With living flesh.

" 'And slowly, slowly on the mound is motion
In that confused and semi-conscious mass:
A shaping is, to banners such as ocean
Waves from its sunken cliffs in giant grass.
Of these some bloom on writhen stalks and shaky,
They spread wide bells in gorgeous-colored row
Whose armlike petals whirl in movement snaky
And that dark wave in many a vortex throw.
Mightiest of all of them
One breaks its stem

" 'And up it sways, glad of its new-found powers,
With even pulsings through its jellied bulk,
Then turns about and o'er the surface towers
A domelike back, smooth, an amazing hulk.
There hangs well pleased, the while its threadlike fingers
Grope through the lake netting an unseen prey;
Anon it moves, hurries apart, or lingers
Where'er it list within the hill-bound bay.
'Twas liquid clay, congealed,
Round like a shield.

" ' But from the crest of that submergèd crater
I saw great arms, each like a mighty snake,
Reach up to clasp the mass of living matter
And the wide disk in thousand fragments break.
Below the spot a monster lay, so hideous
That tongue may not its filthiness relate:
A wreath of wormlike arms; two dull, perfidious,
Blue, glaring eyes; a form swelled up with hate;
A hide that hardly feels
Its cancerous weals.

" 'No bones it had. Those limbs did not belong
To tremulous water, nor to earthcrust solid.
Sans feet, sans wings, it poured itself along
In oozy coils, and on its victim volleyed
A mass of slimy arms with jaws all studded.
These, on the desperate victim closing, sank
Into his flesh. The limbs though lopped still budded
With limbs anew. A horrible midmouth drank
Its live prey, throe on throe,
With tortures slow.

" 'What found itself within those arms involved
Left hope behind. The central mass was tumid
With moving lumps that, swelling, then resolved
Themselves all smooth once more. The captive doomèd
Saw great bleared eyes, a puffed hide red and pale,
And, if at sea, the waters all on sudden
Turned jet with ink, or red with fire. No tail
This ogre had; weapons, nor stone, nor wooden,
Brazen, nor iron could
Draw from it blood.

"'Now if the former shape it quite devoured,
Or by some change grew out of it, who knows?
Brief was its own life, for a fish endowered
With triple strength within the weird pool rose.
All clad in frightful mail the fish ascended
Out of the foam that monster's lashing made,
And when the contest for the sea was ended
Glad in his might the fish his pomp displayed.
Proudly from rim to rim
'Gan he to swim.

"'But still the mound increased with widening acres
And soon its roof kissed the wild water's plane.
The fish was gone, but through the fringing breakers
Crawled such a shape as never salty main,
Deserts, nor woods, nor crags that wound high heaven
Contain to-day—a beast so huge and bad,
The sight alone a nation would have driven
To slay itself, stung with an impulse mad:
Thence cunning lizards trace
Their wicked race.

"'About his neck when from the wave he rose
Were coral gills, through which he sucked the vapor
That filled the hollow vale. From stunted nose
All down his back to where his tail was taper
A fringe of wavy, blotchy hummocks shivered;
But while I gazed both tail and red gills shrank,
Being useless, now the marshy island quivered
Beneath his tread. A while the air he drank
Through his vast yawn, and then
Paced his domain.

"'Bellowed the slimy thing, thereby assignant
In echoes from the funnel-shaped high hills,
Its lordship over all. In eyes malignant
Glittered a thousand after-hatching ills.
Within the roar there muttered a forewarning
Of wars and murders, deaths in after-times,
Of brutal ignorance and fiendish learning,
Of thoughtful lusts and coldly-pondered crimes.
Such was the rancor, it
Its own tail bit!

"'Reared on its hinder legs it marched in wrath
About the isle freshborn from out the ocean,
Gnashing long jaws at all upon its path
And pawing air with strange incessant motion.
Anon upon its body hard and scaly
Began to grow a white and gentle down,
And the forearms, which seemed at first all maily,
Grew fledge with plumage gray, green, black and brown.
Nimrod!' wise Ahram said,
'I grew afraid.

"'For wings it longed, and wings it won. Distorted
With fear of what might come I crouched forlorn.
Behold! the wings were spread, and up it sported
As for the third thin element 'twere born.
But on the island where its race had issue
New births arose of ever-warring shapes
And mighty plants, spongy and soft of tissue,
Clad with gray verdure all the uplifted capes.
There giant reptiles stood
As in a wood.

"'Then on the isle was bellowing and commotion,
Whilst one grim monster with another strove;
With tusk and horn the spawn of earth and ocean
Their hideous strengths against each other drove,
Till at the last a fearful beast was master,
Amazing thewed, with fourfold, plate-like horns,
Tushes that but to look on mean disaster
And writhen trunk that every creature scorns.
Loud she began to bray,
Chief in the fray.

"'Whereat the reptile bird which far was wheeling,
Far o'er the summits of the mountains stark,
Drew down to view what rival had been stealing
Upon his home within the island dark.
He fell from high as tumbleth sheer a lavine
Along the slopes of pure Himal'yan snow,
Proud of his force, ready to make a ravin
Of that slow beast which dared him there below:
Then with their thunder-shock
The isle did rock;

" 'And long they struggled, till his wing was twisted
Beneath the tushes of that queen of herds;
Then the vast weight descended where it listed,
And crushed to death the greatest of all birds.
So vast a bulk was that which won the tourney
Mere living things her life could not sustain;
Wherefore she browsed within the jungle ferny
And stuffed her carcase with a pallid grain.
Deep were her loins and wide,
Stupid her pride.

" 'Beneath the belly where the hide was folded
A pouch there was, wherein she did bestow
Her brood ere they to perfect shape were molded
And cared for them with huge caress and slow.
Her dream that they should hold the isle was blasted,
For from the wood a smaller beast forth crept
Whose sabre teeth of grass had never tasted
But ever flesh from living bone they stripped:
Roaring with voice of fear,
Straight he drew near.

"'With hoofs, teeth, horns, began a conflict dire;
The greater brute in power was a king,
But the lithe other, hot with fourfold fire,
Was far more swift upon his foe to spring.
The snarling, bleeding, rending and bone-crunching
That there ensued can never all be told;
At last I saw the tiger-monster hunching
Across the neck of that beast over-bold.
'Twas like a waterspout
In days of drought

"'That whirls along the sea beneath a cloud,
But, meeting once a sandy promontory,
Empties its tons of water with a loud
Concussant jar. Thus on the arena gory
Fell the huge bulk, the largest that the sun
Has seen, save one, or shall see looking downward,
The clumsiest compound of all beasts that run,
Swim, creep, or fly, that lurk in seas, or sunward
Rear from the swampy grass
Their 'mazing mass.

"'For she contained within her bony box
The forces found in hundred later creatures:
The horns of bulls, the teeth of river-ox,
The legs of horses, and the diverse natures
Of beasts that followed through the centuries.
A clumsy pattern whence succeeding ages
Drew many forms that frighten not, but please.
So, ever widening by progressive stages,
Spread in that valley life
Through endless strife.

"'But all this while the air, the lake, the island
Had suffered change. More perfect each was found:
The air was clearer, lake more fresh, and dry land
Appeared where first was all a soggy ground.
In place of fern and fungus woodlands towered,
Within whose branches hid a manifold
Bird, beast and insect life in leaves embowered
Its varied tale of love and warfare told,
Safe from that brute of guile
A little while.

" 'But soon arose a tyrant in the forest
In shape like man, yet was not man at all;
Right mild of sway and yet of strength the sorest
If any dared to stir his angry gall.
Amid the boughs his dwelling was. Delicious
To him were fruits and water dipped with leaves.
Great was his wit; a sly beast and malicious,
Working his ends by thought which force deceives.
'Gainst the fierce tiger brood
Great was his feud.

" 'There soon I spied them to the proof advancing,
The crouching cat, the wily manlike ape,
Whose great right hand a mighty beam was lancing
With aim the tiger was too dull to 'scape.
The timber flew, the wounded beast sprang shrieking
Upon the ape; but he, with heavy stones,
Beat in the massive skull, a vengeance wreaking
With flashing teeth and horrid growling groans,
And him, though wounded sore,
To ground he bore;

"'To ground he bore the lithe and lovely peril
And, shaking wrathfully the lifeless mass
With broad long tushes, green as is a beryl,
Into his mouth he caused the blood to pass.
Short was his reign. For of his kindred others
Opposed his sway. The island was a field
Whereon great apes forever slew their brothers
That unto them in wiliness must yield.
Soon, on the apelike plan,
Issued a man.

"'Till now the broods of fish and beast and bird
Lived planless, still their daily wants sufficing.
Now had a king of all of them appeared
With forethought armed, by subtle craft enticing
All living to their ruin, or to serve
His own shrewd ends. He made so great a slaughter
That hardly could the race of beasts observe
What killed them. Fish with wood he slew, with water
Drowned the dull cavern bear
Within his lair.

" ' The cunning brain that slew the greatest beasts
Imposed on all a fierce incessant battle,
From dry wood rubbed his fire, and at his feasts
Treated his captives like submissive cattle.
Beasts fly from beasts. By rocks and trees concealed
They rear their young, they prosper, though they tremble;
But man so keen, so fierce a wit did wield,
That no place served where quarry might assemble;
Quickly he followed, still
The weak to kill.

" ' Weak though his force, by his unearthly guile
All apes he beat, all birds and beasts o'ercame;
Then with his fellow man an endless coil
Of fights, deceits and slaughters he did frame.
Polished he grew, luxurious and conceited,
And where before deceitfulness meant life,
His brothers he from malice pure defeated,
Forever mixed in fierce relentless strife,
Where still the wiliest one
Forever won.

" 'Then was it plain that he of all, alone,
Each sound could imitate and read the intention
Concealed behind an act. For he was prone
To save himself by sly or bold invention;
And thereto framed an ever-varying code,
A fruitful web of gestures and grimaces
Whereto success in many a fight he owed,
Wherefrom came aid in thousand perilous cases
Now that with fellow man
His craft could plan.

" 'And whilst before by signs and guttural barks
Men called to men; now a most wise invention
Of chanting tones the varying spirit marks
With ordered speech, wherethrough a separate mention
Each bird and beast receives, each tree, each wind,
The mountains, lakes, the fruits and herbs and rivers;
But those who spake right soon did leave behind
Their duller foes. Who bent not to their wishes
Was snapped as snaps a reed,
Plucked like a weed.

"'Then faster, faster rose continual changes
Till men there were so equal in their brain
That each defends the forest that he ranges,
Not safe, but ready to attack, maintain
An equal battle, or by flight to 'scape;
And next began the luxuries to gather,
The useless arts that good and evil shape
In even measure. For great wealth is father
To vice and to fine arts
In equal parts.

"'But the small tarn that once was close and narrow
Had grown apace into an isly mere,
Where one kept flocks, the next made axe and harrow,
Plowed, and from earth drew bread. And then with clear
Brown ferment of his grain he brewed a liquor
Stronger than what, from tender grapes out-pressed,
A third man drank. In boats, still quicker, quicker
Across the waves they forayed east and west,
Fought, and made peace, and lied;
Wived, multiplied.

"'Their manners grew so strangely complicated
My wildered brain the cause in vain would ask
Why this was done, not that: as, why they mated
With that mate, not with this; and why one task
Gave health and strength, another slow extinction;
Why men that held them proudest fell most soon;
Why they were barren who had most distinction,
And they bred strongest who were hardiest grown;
Why Use and sad Abuse
Warred without truce?

"'Yet some grew wise beyond all human bounds
And at their deaths, or violent, or peaceful,
Out of the mouths of such, with moaning sounds,
A Something fluttering, took on shape, or graceful
Or else as bestial as those monsters grim
That went before. Then well I marked their nature:
The beauteous ghost was issuant from him
Whose life had been of service to each creature;
The hideous bred in shoals
From cruel souls.

"'For there was seen amid the warring men
That twain of spirits born from finer ether:
The hater of mankind who loves to pain
All creatures, he who has a heart for neither
Virtue, nor youth, nor age, nor weak, nor foolish;
Of him did giant minds evolve the jinn
With powers unholy and with aspect ghoulish,
Dowered with strength through many a guile to win
Luck from the good, and yet
Endless regret.

"'The other spirit was of equal force,
But all his thought was how to cure the ailing,
Succor the needy, and to arrest the course
Of headlong miseries, support the failing,
Aid the advance of prosperers, and joy
In all things good. The pathways most laborious
This fairy trod, for things which most annoy
To him were sweet, absorbing, high, most glorious,
Once their resultant stood
For some light good.

"'But if I shuddered when that monster's wings
Grew out before, how did I shake and shiver
When into space, as light as smoke outrings
Spiral from tents, those jinns began to quiver
Their pinions in the air! Like boys possessed
With horror of a spectre in the gloaming
I girt my loins and upward madly pressed,
Sure that I heard a rustling and a foaming
As if the mere did rise
Me to surprise!

"'And as from tier to tier of hills I fled,
Among the rocks I saw on either side
Forms like the forms that through their lives had sped
Before my sight. There lay, all petrified,
The plantlike fish and fishlike plants, the true
Life-bearing beasts, and, near the last high portal,
Again those statues which had power to glue
My hasting feet by whispers of immortal
Bliss, if I did but dare
To linger there.

"'One on a tortoise sat, and one within
A shark's wide mouth; a third form stood boar-headed;
A fourth, half lion; and another's grin
Was that of apes; while he I no less dreaded
Handled an axe; the seventh was a bowman;
The eighth blew soundless on a magic flute;
The ninth, a saint of piety unhuman;
The tenth, a gay swain in a warrior's suit;
Each figure in its way
Willed me to stay.

"'Why did I fly? Mayhap it had been better
With them my lot to cast. Then, Nimrod, you
Had found me not, when that most grievous fetter
About my nation cast resistless drew
Our remnant hither to great Babylon.
Alas, alas! Who knows the best in fortune?
Sure is but this: those demons would have won,
Charming with spells that subtly can importune,
Had not a now-lost face
Pleaded for grace!'"

" Thus, O barbarians, Ahram told the tale
Of life's progressive and antique creation;
Once only found he that miraculous vale
In Himalaya, saw the jinns' evasion
Once only! What the strange recital meant
How can I tell, a ghost who sees all blurry?
Yet 'tis of import lofty, and was sent
To lesson me, to save me from the sorry
Fate of my after years.
Open your ears,

" Open your ears! Ere downy-footed morn,
Warming the sky with beckoning rosy fingers,
Has broke the dusk and from my shoulders torn
What wretched simulacrum thereon lingers,
Revolve what efforts at the first I made
To keep the path of right, and how I faltered.
But turn again when falls the evening's shade
And hear my story out, no word being altered
From the first sad refrain
Of this old pain."

V

ESTHER THE VESTAL

V

ESTHER THE VESTAL

"On these wide plains, which once stood all a-ripple
With grain by strange-tongued, swarthy races sowed,
I gave the remnant of wise Ahram's people
A goodly portion and a guard bestowed;
But in my palace where the wealth of nations,
Gems, vases, carpets, what the silk-worm spins
Were thickly cast, the highest of all stations
Was held by Ahram always clad in skins.
Counselor, treasurer,
My key he bare.

"How shall I count the works of public weal
By Ahram fathered and my nations finished?
The fields reclaimed? his superhuman zeal
To plan canals and mighty dikes that 'minished
Floods in the season of the Hyades?
On every side of Babylon the wondrous
Are rivers deeper made; the Indian seas
Stretch to my quays of bronze, whereat the ponderous
Whale and the desert ship
A like wave sip.

"But chiefly I sought, from him in wit abounding,
To learn the future of the fateful skies,
To see how soon a second flood, confounding
These plains again, my kingdom might surprise;
For well I pondered how, before my sire
Pushed westward, warring on ancestral foes,
The sky fell down, the sea frothed up, till higher
Than all the hills save Ararat it rose.
Then were the nations found
Like conies drowned.

"As god I moved, yet, prone to human errors,
I longed to be from other gods assured.
Evil foreknown is shorn of half its terrors
And at the last with steadfastness endured.
Should I an ark contrive, strong-ribbed, gigantic,
Like those few souls who plowed the old whelming sea,
Wherein to shut myself against the frantic,
Wild spray of men that madly then would flee
Upward ascending waves
And unhewn graves?

"Or should I seize on all the Western regions
And on their highest and most holy peak
Plant me a temple whence my harnessed legions
Should spread the earth's remotest bounds to seek?
Or on the edge of my embowered gardens
Should I cause grow a most enormous wall
Of mortised stone with well-burnt lime that hardens
With time the more, the more that showers fall—
Thus, when the ooze waxed high,
To keep me dry?

"But then I feared, should I my kingdom alter,
The robber hordes from past the Caspian gates
Would sack my towns, leading my folk in halter,
Trample my fields, level the fruit-hung dates.
Or, if I built the wall, ten thousand wretches
Would desperate climb along the rising flood
And swarm like rats when some old willow stretches
Its arm in pity toward the struggling brood.
'Ahram,' I cried thought-wan,
'Find me a plan!'

"And Ahram pondered. At the last he claimed
A year to seek the deathless truth, a permit
For six months' counsel with the old and famed
And six months' brooding as a mountain-hermit.
I gave the year, and Ahram to my keeping
Left his small tribe, his kindred and his flocks.
I saw no spoiler through their lands went reaping,
No hand of violence dared unbar their locks.
Ahram was far away
One year and day.

"Now in my train the eunuch Bitsu stood
Chief of my household. His, to gather tidings
Of distant wars, revolts, the secret brood
Of thoughts of minds ambitious that have hidings
In towns of strength. He spied upon the slaves,
The thousand wives, the soldiers of my harem.
At his least word a swift-foot runner braves
The perilous waste, the hail-storm's dread alarum.
Bitsu, once Ahram gone,
Was quick to fawn.

"'King!' thus he cried. 'God, to whom earthly nations
Are dust, and whom the sky has loaned! Great god!
Is it your will that all the hid relations
Of men submit to your approving nod?
O king of kings, Ahram preserves some treasure
Secret, rare, tempting, in his new-built town.
I have not seen it, but I know the measure
Of wealth that he for that thing will disown!
'Tis a strange gem he saves
Too great for slaves.

"'Without your leave the vizier [who is greater,
It seems, than Nimrod even] sent back men
Of his own tribe, and put to death as traitor
That chief who led us to his mountain den;
And then from out the valleys where the snow
Lies half the year was brought this bulky jewel,
Vase of fine metal, ark or idol, so
Enchanting that no rare and costly fuel
Burns on its altar stair
Too rich, too rare.

"'Say but the word, and to an inner chamber
Which no man sees, not even his tribal kin,
My spearmen break, my nimble footmen clamber
And from the town that secret we shall win.'
But—'Peace!' I cried; 'tempt me no more! I ask
Of Ahram wonders deep and mind-perplexing;
'Tis not for us to mar his god-like task,
With greedy souls his little household vexing.
Get you back whence you came,
You and your shame!'

"He fled. When Ahram came, his shining forehead
Told that the problem had been solved at last.
I knew his brain contained the temple storied
Should save the future and condone the past.
Three days we talked, three nights and days great Ahram
Told me the plan of his gigantic charm;
Three days and nights my wonder-stricken harem
Watched without rest for sounds of joy or harm;
When, suddenly, east and west
My runners raced.

"'Twas then I raised in Babylon the building,
Trophy of conquests o'er the sky and earth,
Whose gold the kings replaced by paltry gilding,
Whose mimicked form but roused my hollow mirth.
Fools that they were to try replace the hidden
Wise, planet-reckoned secrets of that fane!
The demons laugh when fondly they are bidden;
Monarchs that wisdom lack must build in vain.
Mine was the only one
That favor won.

"Ay, many enigmas lay within the plans
And projects Ahram drew for all men's wonder.
And first it stood a symbol to the clans
Of following epochs that the king, whose plunder
Was drawn from every nation, could ordain
A mausoleum such as Egypt's princes
Had not to show on Nile's o'erteeming plain.
It was the tomb for one who nowise minces
Words, but whose lightest say
Kings must obey.

"But to the living world the fabric beaconed
The fame of Kush, my father huge of arm;
Thus was inculcate, so wise Ahram reckoned,
Regard for parents; thus was raised a charm
To save an impious city from o'erthrowal.
Who saw at morn that land-mark 'gainst the sun,
Sure of much offspring, won a rich bestowal
Of flocks and grain; who watched it, day being done,
To him thrice profits grew;
His wives were true.

"So on this spot, to all the stars propitious,
A mighty, square foundation was intrenched;
With blood from bulls, instead of slaves pernicious,
Ahram in mystic rite the area drenched.
Its basement was of rock and sun-baked brick,
Square, wisely cornered; it would hold a river;
Vaulted it was and dark, with walls so thick
No raging sea might ever make it quiver!
Window it had but one
And always shone

"Therethrough the north star red, the wise, the healthy;
Its ruddy eye forever pierced the murk,
Fixing in magic chains those spirits filthy
That in the bowels of earth uneasy lurk.
This star alone forever holds his station
Without one change which eye of man may see,
A ruby pivot, whereon all the nation
Of heavenly ones revolve eternally.
Sublimest sentinel,
He stares on hell.

" By cloudy nights, when all the sky was wild,
The spirits black, the jinn, the elf, the devil
Rode on the wind, the flowers of earth defiled,
Tore at the tower and havoc played in revel,
Should yet the north star, when the storm clouds drift
By will of God a little way asunder,
Drive but one gold dart through a fortunate rift—
Back to their holes the swarming demons blunder,
Fearing the diamond lance
Of his clean glance.

" If men dared creep therethrough by torchlight dim,
They saw, low molded on the slimy walling,
Monsters of hideous view, misshapen, grim,
With grisly mien the stoutest heart appalling.
Vast scaly beasts with eyes replete with loathing,
Pale, flabby worms in tortuous intercoil
And snakes like weeds a rocky cavern clothing
Seemed the foul den with their foul skins to soil.
And yet a strange cold smile
Grinned from the pile;

" For they were glad, those figures worse than bestial,
Though far too vile to care for aught on earth
Save their own dross ; they loathed all things celestial
And ate the spawn to which they gave a birth.
Their lumpish limbs they rent from one another
Where in a dreadful battle they were knit,
Nor felt a hurt. Each bleeding dragon brother
Fought with his stumps and though in death throes bit.
Of them the sudden fright
Would blanch hair white.

" Into this square base from Euphrates led
A deep canal o'er-vaulted all and hidden
From light and men. By sluices great was stayed
The rush of sudden waters, until bidden
To flood the whole. A granite chest stood there
Empty, but carved with all my wars laborious ;
There, sealed in lead, my earthly frame should wear
About it water and above a glorious
Sky-reaching, marvelous tower,
Sign of my power.

"Then on the deep foundation thick and roomy
Builded throughout by that short swarthy race
Which tilled the marshes when my father gloomy
His blood-stained triumphs from the East did trace,
I causèd seven of the proudest peoples
Skillful with tools and forced to labors rude
To raise this model of your mosques and steeples,
This tower pyramidal and diverse-hued
Which like the mountains hoar
Steadfast should soar.

"It was a mountain in itself. It told
Of Eastern hills that gave my father being.
On the long plains, which then far smoother rolled,
It soared from earth as though to heaven fleeing
Up from the squalor of the low-roofed town.
Was the sun fierce, or came the wintry breezes,
Still kept the tower, or at foot, or crown,
Cool for the parched, or warmth for him who freezes,
Just as, when seasons change,
Hill-dwellers range.

"Then were Euphrates' face and all my borders
Crawling with slaves who still my praises sung;
A hundred tribes obedient to my orders
Hailed me a god in each conflicting tongue.
No king might stay, however dread of power,
His hand from laboring, despite his worth,
Nor even might Nimrod's self withhold his hour
Of work to raise the lordliest flower of earth.
The architect approved
But no hand moved.

"Black was the first tier. Those were Nile-horse tamers
Who baked the pitchy bricks and laid them clear.
White was the next, whereof the smooth-limbed framers
Were clean-cut Greeks from out their isly mere.
Saffron the third; only the endless treasures
Of Indian kings such costly tint could buy;
To dye those bricks what unrecorded measures
Of tender roots their husbandmen supply!
These were the first of seven
'Twixt earth and heaven.

"My Medes and Persians then their necks submitted
And toiled to rear a story all of blue.
The mariners of warlike Sidon fitted
Their share of porcelain red as blood in hue.
The sixth was silver; their fierce spirit broken,
Iberians wrought it, from the sunset drawn;
The seventh was sheathed in gold and stood a token
Of princes humbled near the gates of dawn.
Each one was given two names—
Honors and shames.

"For each was sign of some great monarch's ravin,
But each spoke, too, of a celestial star:
My heavenly captains were the planets seven
That rain down victory in each glorious war.
About the whole a horse-shoe wall was builded
Black, with one issue toward the southern plain,
Whose inner face with hunting scenes was gilded:
There lay a lioness by javelin slain;
A mountain cow lay here
Pierced by a spear.

"Beyond, the workmen of my swarthy nation
Had molded fine upon a pitchy ground
The hill whereon the king his chase did station,
The plain on which a varied prey was found.
Above were seen the gentle birds of heaven
Whom well-taught hawks on tireless wing pursued,
Doves which the falcon from their nest had driven,
And ducks whose feathers were with blood imbrued.
These were the scenes which shone
Within that zone.

"But at the portal of those precincts holy
Two figures crouched, of most majestic mien;
So cunning framed that they might baffle solely
The jinns which keep the land from growing green.
Upon the right, hewn from one rock gigantic,
There kneeled a bull; but all his upper frame
Was like a man's. The virtues necromantic
Of this great charm all demons male could tame.
On his tongue's tip alway
One finger lay.

"And on the left, over the way, was lying
A mighty leopardess with sword-like claws,
Yet woman all above. Now, she replying
With gesture meet, yet different, gives pause
With hollow right hand to her shelly ear;
And, while with rage the leopard claws are gripping,
Her clear, calm, slumbrous-lidded traits appear
To yearn for sounds all other ears outstripping,
While her clenched left is pressed
Tight to her breast.

"Such talismans of watchful care and cunning
Did Ahram found, so that no evil jinn
Female or male, no hungry spirit dunning
For ghostly food and prayers which lighten sin
Should dare invade the temple of the fire,
Which as a flame stiffened to brick and stone
Still from a round hearth skyward should aspire,
So long as issued from the bull no tone,
And while that palm of her
Never made stir.

"How frame the wonders, mark the heavenly traces
To those who knew revealed within the pile?
So squared the basement was, alternate faces
Looked eastward, south, west, northward o'er the plain.
The strange huge shadow swung about the basis
With tale of moons, of seasons, hours of day,
An index vast, whose most entangled mazes
My beggar architect thought out in play,
Wherein he did disguise
Truths of the skies.

"Of gold and sunshine and of angels South
The first fane argued; of the North and glittering
Moon-rays, the next; the third, of sprites of drouth,
Ruddy, by West all husbandmen embittering;
The fourth of saffron and of morning dyes
Round the whole compass; but the fifth, of heaven
And upward height and blue from noonday skies.
Downward and black, the lowest of the seven
Did for all being fix
Dimensions six.

"And that fane sixth, the greatest saving one,
Betokened centers which have no dimension,
Yet being, are. Weigh all the building's sum,
And Ahram's subtle and matured invention
Placed that as mid-point where the balances
Would straightly poise, nor jog.—
But why discover
Problems, when things of beauty, sure to please,
Crowd to a mind that runs with memories over
While the tongue, rusty, trips
Between the lips?

"From right to left about the flashing mass
Arose a spiral stair, the tower ringing,
Whereon aloft my jeweled throne could pass
As round the Polestar goes the dragon singing;
But on the crest—a glittering far-seen wonder
Of jade, of amber and of facet-stone—
With mine own hands I built to the god of thunder
The sacred fane where he might house alone,
With couch both soft and wide
For his own bride.

"Her had my seer selected from his folk;
She was the gem that hid within his dwelling;
A maid of spirit, never galled by yoke,
By name of Esther splendid fates foretelling.
With fearful oaths, by lightning-bolt and thunder,
By evil genii, by my father's beard,
I swore no man her sacred zone should sunder,
But always, high in the pure sky up-reared,
She in the shrine should spread
The air-god's bed.

"Small was the care that Nimrod had for women!
Of wondrous queens too many I had known
Eager to be my sport, my slave, my leman,
Whose beauty well had won a separate throne.
One after one I threw them by, disgusted,
Yet the least glorious in these pygmy days
Would shine like moons compared with targets rusted
Beside the beauties whom ye moderns praise!
Esther was given grace
To see my face.

" Her veil was drawn. Ah, what a heavenly splendor
Broke from her form upon my jaded eyes!
' Prophet,' I cried, ' 'tis well you did not render
Account to me of this most glorious prize!
But I have sworn. Load her with gifts and station
A woman's guard about the elected maid;
Bid that a herald to each subject nation
Trumpet the name of her whom I have made
Greatest of women; ay,
Bride of the sky!'

" She was so quiet! Yet, methought, most thrilling
That stillness was. And when each lazy sheath
Sloped over eyes like opals, I was willing
To swear her loveliest yet. But when beneath
Shot out the startled radiance of those eyes,
O, then she seemed no earthly, fleshly creature;
I stood aghast, lest toward the envious skies
She might ascend before my hand could reach her,
Draw her close, breath to breath,
Once ere my death!

"But no! Though Iran could contain no woman
Safe from my will, this single girl alone
Had been reserved by vows so superhuman
That far away from my embrace she'd grown.
Strange are the deeds of love! That my great body
Should tremble leaflike at a captive maid,
Should glow with rapture while a cheek grows ruddy,
And at a frown turn anxious and afraid!
She and the seer of mine
Were half divine.

"Betwixt her brows Ishtar had set her seal
Shaped like an oval mole. In other maidens
Haply that mark a blemish would reveal;
Not so with her: it was in rhyme, in cadence
With all her wondrous charm for joy and harm.
Nor perfect was her figure, nor quite even
The features of her face; yet all was warm
With such a look! as if from glowing heaven
Falling, to woman turned,
The love-star burned.

VI

THE UPPER FANES

VI

THE UPPER FANES

"BUT let me strive, although the night be waning,
To tell by rote a portion of the scene
That once shone here, though naught be now remaining
In proof of memories of what things have been
Upon a chosen, separate day those seven
Tall stories, each with dark rites, were begun
That from a subtile reckoning with heaven
I and my peoples every ill might shun.
Space was o'ercome. Superb
Time felt my curb.

"And first we were the day's great wheel renowning:
His shrine of gold, second to none in worth,
The six times variegated stories crowning,
Spired aloft far from the awestruck earth.
To each there was a fourfold statued portal,
Since four times seven the days of every moon;
Four doors, seven stories and the fane immortal
Are twelve all told from monsoon to monsoon.
Year, month and day and hour
Stood in its power.

"The four doors of the topmost fane were built
Of glittering sunstone and of topaz golden.
They seemed from far undecked, yet were they drilled
With marvelous gravings. You had there beholden
In delicate networks of incisèd lines
Lions, bulls, boars, the shape of Behemoth;
In deep green emeralds there were pictured pines
And banyan-trees of huge and vigorous growth;
Tongue could not name the swarms
Of sun-vowed forms!

"When first the sungod's matin eyes came beaming
In at the eastern door of his own fane
With hands of gold he touched fine harps, the dreaming
Sky's bride to call from slumber's tangled skein.
Above the cities of the plain the tender
Evasive strains dropt gently from the sky;
The peoples knelt and toward that morning splendor
Their cleansèd brows and wide palms stretched on high;
Low on the sun-gilt spire
Burned Esther's fire.

"Within the sun-god's fleckless habitation
No altar was, no rug of any hue;
All was clear glass, wherein by duplication
A thousand-fold the sun himself did view.
A single diamond window overhead
Focussed his rays, just as he reached high heaven,
And lit the sandal-wood which Esther spread
To catch the bounty by the sun-god given.
Yet did she never dare
To enter there!

" No woman might that holy fane invade ;
But Esther, at the western doorway kneeling,
Plenished each noon her fire, though sore afraid,
Lest the great god, his soundless sun-bolt dealing,
Should strike her dead. But when her torch was lit
Up to her shrine upon the platform giddy
Like frighted dove to dovecote she would flit
With bated breath, with cold hands, feet unsteady.
Then knew all Babylon
That noon was on.

" But when came evening with a rest from toil
The hidden harps, gift from the Orient's princes,
Rang out their music o'er the teeming soil
To master worn with watching, slave that winces
At cruel goad. Then tower-ward turned each face,
Spoke litanies for me and for their altars,
Against the powers of darkness begged for grace,
Intoned, or whispered, as they stood, the psalters
That sing how all men yearn
For sun's return.

"Thus was appeased the first day of the seven;
The next belonged to her who shines most bright
When stars are palest and the gloomy heaven
Has lost all traces of the sun-god's light.
The silvery moon that hunts when clouds are thick
Within the shrine was bidden to her dwelling;
Moon that gives love, but empty all and sick,
No sooner forming than at once dispelling,
Quick as the mists that steal
Past her white wheel.

"The outer wall in mansions eight and twenty
Divided was, wherein low-graven stood
Symbols of stars that drought portend, or plenty
Of rain or wind, and formed a dial rude
For the whole month. But inside at the centre
A pillar rose of half-transparent stone:
Should one at nightfall in that precinct enter,
The mass with such unearthly pallor shone
As if a lamp it bore
Deep in its core.

" Of crystal were the jambs and lintels made ;
The thresholds four, precious with jewels stranger,
Were formed of moonstones that are used in aid
Of those the moon has brought in secret danger.
Sad are the maidens by the moonstroke blighted !
They rise from sleep, drawn by a hidden force ;
Through perilous ways they stare ; they walk unlighted
Like murderers mad with shadowy wild remorse ;
Waking from hideous dreams
With crazy screams.

" But inward round the tier, all silver crusted,
Fair wrought by captives from the western isles,
A tale of grief was to the walls intrusted—
How bootless love that heavenly queen beguiles.
O'er hill and dale the fair was pictured flying
To overtake her love with golden hair ;
Her lover deaf, who wist not of her sighing
And saw not, blind, the marks of her despair !
Then in a pleasant land
She seems to stand,

"Where at the last her lover is o'ertaken:
He lies upon a couch of spicy leaves;
But his sweet eyelids, though with kisses shaken,
Will never ope for any wile she weaves.
And farther on the artful western painter
Had limned her flying back in sore dismay,
Whereat the charm grew faint and ever fainter
Until he woke and blithely hied his way:
Thereat the queen renewed
Her following rude.

"And once again she's caught him; but alas!
What deadly spite is this? He cannot see her.
Swiftly from sight her lovely form must pass
Just when he waits and seems no more to flee her!
She waves her arms—alas! he is unconscious;
Her bosom bares, but all her charms are naught;
She fain would shriek, but not a whisper launches
From out the mouth of her with love distraught.
Nay, than thin air her white
Hand is less light.

"Thereby was seen where those Iberians savage
A hunt had drawn. They showed with crafty skill
Upon the youth a boar commit such ravage
That all his life upon the grass did spill.
Thereon was pictured how his heavenly lover,
Stricken with anguish at his mortal pain,
Above him, weeping, in the air did hover,
Shrieked and implored for help—yet all in vain!
On her hard virgin breast
Rocked him to rest

"And mourned his loss with woodland ways of sorrow,
With band of nymphs disheveled and forlorn,
Satyrs in sackcloth and sly fauns that borrow
For once a visage tearful, sad and worn.
Within the cave he stretched, embalmed and fragrant
As once he lay beneath the strange sleeping-spell;
Thither by night she turned her footsteps vagrant
Her anguish to the rocks and woods to tell.
Such was Fate's bitter boon
To the pale moon.

"Whose was the third day and the third high story?
Beneath the platform of the queen of night
The fane was built for him who loves the gory
Affronts of battle and the thick of fight.
He is the god of that small angry star
Red as the sky when sun in wrath is setting
Which, most portentous of a coming war,
Is cause of fame's and misery's begetting.
These walls the blood-stained hands
Of pirate bands

"From Sidon faring stained with carnal juices
Bright red like blood. The cornices within
Were hung with targets, weapons for all uses,
Trumpets that bray across the battle-din.
The floor was all a field of grassy fire
That flickered still, yet never lower burned,
So true to life, the foot was lifted higher
As if the lesson never could be learned.
For 'tis a hot, quick fire,
The war-god's ire.

"And round about the art of skilled Phœnicians
Had painted fresh the taking of a town.
High on a tower a score of wan magicians
Besought the planet on their foes to frown.
Along the town-walls iron-souled defenders
With boiling lead, with stone and spear and dart
Fight with a useless rage that only renders
The victor dire and adamant of heart.
There, on the lower plane,
A dreadful train

"Of harnessed men strode on with leveled lances
In windy rows, as when the pulsing breeze
Bows into even ranks as it advances
The wintry tops of glittering ice-bound trees.
They storm the wall; they swarm at every angle;
They cut and thrust; they fling the quenchless torch;
Though arms are lopped, their teeth the foe can mangle
Reckless of how the gathering flames may scorch.
Beyond, a stately fleet
The sight did greet

"Where too was battle and a dire commotion:
Against each other like to mad bulls ran
The myriad-footed galleys. All the ocean
Was full of wrecks as far as eye could scan.
Here lay two hulks, whereon a tide of seamen
Flowed to and fro in grapple desperate;
There, on a captive merchantman, the women
Destroyed themselves to escape a terrible fate.
The sea with blood is red:
Countless the dead.

"Next there was limned a plain encumbered densely
With horse and foot, with chariots flecked with gore,
O'er which there hung the horror that intensely
Grips at the nerves in hushes just before
The jar of battle. Eyes might hear the moan,
The hideous crash, the carnage and the madness.
With broken armor all the field was sown
And through it stalked the war-god, smiling gladness,
Sucking some grateful death
With each new breath.

"The doorways to the shrine of Mars had arches
Of spotty bloodstone, while each pillar's head
Was formed like skulls of wolves that dog the marches
Of wounded braves. Rubies of gleaming red
These had for eyes, and on each bare skull stood
The red-pate bird that startles the lone forest
With taps like drum, when against fields of blood
The dogs howl loudest, wives are weeping sorest:
Such was the grisly fane
Of man's great bane.

"Now underneath, unto the fourth day given,
Spread out the temple of the tiny star
Which never frankly shines in midmost heaven
But hides its head before the god of war.
Blue was the house that planet, the dissembler,
The slippery one was bidden to invade;
A merchant race, for merchandise a trembler,
The far-fetched tiles of sky-sprung azure made,
Tiles by the folk designed
Of farther Inde.

"The hall within was lined with diverse metal
Whereon by craftsmen were sly pictures sealed
With fire in low relief; thus: men who settle
A barter, and, their perjuries revealed,
Make off with ill-got gains; a subtle thief
Who crawls upon a campment in the dawning
To steal a blood-horse, but when caught reprief
Obtains by witty lies and crafty fawning.
Such were the scenes applied
To the east side.

"Along the north stretched out a snowy region
Wherein lithe youths were sweating at their play,
Made mimic war between each mimic legion
And trained their bodies all the livelong day.
O'er snow, near by, one saw a file of deer
Were swiftly drawing cars of merchandise
And farther on the courts of towns appear
Where orators lead captive all men's eyes,
Swaying the mobile throng
Toward right or wrong.

" Upon the west was made a sea in motion
With tossing ships careening to the blast;
Adventurers were seen appeasing ocean
By costly presents on the waters cast.
Not far away there rose a range of hills
Where men for ores, the furnace melted, burrow;
Here for a heavy crop the sand they till
And there the beds of empty streams they furrow,
Even as my Median bands
Searched the far strands.

" And furthermore, the southern wall adorning,
In caravans from torrid climes are seen
Beasts and strange birds, men who are all men's scorning
For monstrous shape, for fierce or puny mien;
Men of vast strength, men of a baby's size,
With heads too great, or feet like elephants,
Serpents in baskets, many a brook-won prize
Of glittering gems, healing and hard-found plants;
Bark from envenomed trees
Which cure disease.

"The ceiling was a miracle of art
With sapphires deep and palest turquoise blended.
A sky was there, whereof one cloudy part
Was milky quartz; as if a storm had ended
Across the darker clouds was drawn that bridge
Of wondrous hues whereon the sky's great father
Sends earthward fast his messenger as pledge
That for a time his wrath shall cease to gather,
Revenging fast insult
With lightning bolt.

"Like palm-trees were the pillars of the gates
Of this lithe god, around the which were tangled
Wise serpents topaz-green; each one his mate's
Mouth, tail and middle touched in peace, nor mangled
With teeth his friend. Thus was the fane. Far greater
The shrine below, for o'er each august portal
Was shaped in ebon the strong serpent-hater,
The eagle which if not slain is immortal,
Nor e'er is dying found
On the earth's round.

For eagles that as nestlings learn to gaze
  Deep in the eye of the great world-reviver
And are destroyed unless they stand the blaze
  Unwinking; eagles are their own depriver
Of outworn life. When beak and claws are grown
  So crook, they cannot rend or strike the quarry,
Sunward in tempest towering, sheerly down
  They dash upon the ocean! and a sorry
    Featherless, shapeless form
    Sinks in the storm.

VII

THE LOWER TEMPLES

VII

THE LOWER TEMPLES

"COULD you have passed the gateways of the story
Third from the earth, vowed to the great fifth day,
It would have seemed that in an oak-grove hoary
With age, yet lusty, chanced your feet to stray.
The ceiling seemed with leafy boughs bespread
And upper walls with mighty tree-trunks dense;
But underneath on carven screens were read
Tales of high prowess, victories immense
O'er the astounding, rude
Titanic brood.

"The place was sacred to that royal star
Which sails majestic through supernal ether;
Of mighty force to help the earth or mar;
The cloud-compeller, the white mountain-wreather,
The thunderer in hail-storm or in rain,
The god whose voice is heard in wailing branches,
Who, toying with the crocus on the plain,
Shakes the hill-passes with his avalanches;
Who levels towns, who stirs
Ripe chestnut burrs.

"And there along the wainscot, deftly graven,
Were banqueters who smiled above a feast:
Here sat a king; there priests with crowns all shaven
In shape of sun or moon. The royal beast
Lay there as watchdog to the throne, the lion.
Before them filed an army, one array
Of pompous pride, and at their head the scion
Of kingly line his mincing horse did play.
Such was the festal sight
Upon the right.

"But let me tell you how the gates were framed:
Of amethyst the southern door was builded,
Friendly to drunkards of their vice ashamed.
With yellow sards the northern posts were gilded.
Upon the east stood pillars of dark jade,
Concealing, half revealing crafty gravings.
The western doorway was of loadstone made
That draws from far metals in slender shavings
Even as the sun draws still
Earth's every hill.

"To left the ranks of royal oaks were broken
By olive groves; on panels of dark wood
Stood fields of tender grain but late awoken
From wintry sleep, and next in furrows stood
The eldest of a band of husbandmen;
Up to the clouds a grateful hand he lifted
In thanks for purging wind and gend'ring rain
And with weak arms a mimic snow he sifted
Of seeds in hope to please
The lord of trees.

"But on the next wall was a dire contention
Between the generous god and those rude sons
Of chaos and commotion. Deep invention
Can only stem the force that, like to tons
Of mindless stone, their swollen bodies wield!
The god of rain was pictured with his lightning
Streaming resistless o'er his awful shield,
The sheen whereof, all lesser giants fright'ning,
Drove to their former berth
In heart of earth.

"Yet farther on was seen the first great forming
Of iron weapons. From the mountain side
The god had digged the ore, and fashioned, warming
In lambent flame, a sword so sharp, hard, wide,
The tooth of time it blunted.
On a tyrant
The blade he tried. The latter fled away,
Dropping from nerveless arms the last aspirant
To his old throne, an own son; them to slay
Always had been his wont
Before that brunt.

"And he, of his own offspring the afflicter,
Was honored, too, in seventh and lowest tier;
But mighty lay betwixt him and his victor
The shrine of her who dulls the wargod's spear,
Strips of their pride divinities the greatest,
Humbles to dust the careless, snubs disdain—
A goddess who, if earliest not is latest
And in the hearts of graybeards still shall reign.
She who within her sphere
Has not a peer.

"Whom do I mean save Ishtar? Nimrod even,
I, hard-thewed hunter, at the last was crushed
Beneath her ivory heel. Within that haven
All noises rude, all voices rough were hushed.
Cooing of doves, the amorous cat's soft purring
Were there allowed, but of the voice of men
Only those mellow with the heart's deep stirring
Echoing about the murmurous chambers ran.
List how to earth that flame
Of white love came!

" It was in spring-time, in the world's fair morning,
When gracious, fickle and alluring sea
Yearned for still earth with such deep-rooted longing
That stirred at heart was her immensity.
From every part the ocean drew her finer,
More spiritual essence into foamy wave,
Whereof the allied winds became refiner,
And, far by south, to one close spiral drave,
Where lay, as though in bower,
The world's one flower—

" Ishtar the white, the rosy, the transparent.
Her fragrant head was pillowed on a hand
Cunningly 'twixt her yellow locks apparent
As smoothy milkstones hide in golden sand.
Her dimpled elbow on the wave reclining
Gave to her weight a little, but no more ;
Her sun-bright tresses were not wet but shining
With humid kisses of the dark-green floor.
Her counterfeit could move
To dreams of love.

"That was great Ishtar's making. Phrygian Greeks
Engraved her thus within the marble palace
Sixth from the top. For hers is still the week's
Sixth day amongst you. Half within the chalice
Of one wide-petaled lotus-bloom she lay;
About her sported dolphins; through the billows
Bending before her they did steer their way
And drew the goddess on her perfumed pillows.
There the clear marble stone
With soft hues shone

"Not painted, but in darkness fashioned slowly
Within the heart of subtly-shaping earth.
The craft to cut that stone had vanished wholly
Long years before ye moderns had your birth.
The floor of Ishtar was of stone so clear
It looked a sea, a still lake or a mirror
Wherein inverted did the fane appear:
The entering novice was at first in error
Lest in a cool wave's lip
Her sandal dip.

"And here and there upon the walls were chiseled
Most lifelike groves of myrtle, rose and peach;
Apples of love, pomegranates which to grizzled
And languid age a youthful vigor teach.
Among their leaves were sparrows; swans and doves
Were mimicked well along that pooly mirror;
The bird was there that all too fondly loves
Its absent mate and dies of lonely terror.
In the wide lintel's cope
Its eye did ope

"One rose-white jewel set with pearl and beryl
Yellow, white, green, whereof the shifty sheen
Was told again within the waters sterile
Of that false pool. The opal great, I ween,
A symbol was of love that hides from sight,
Yet burns the hotter still, albeit hidden;
And in strange ways and devious comes to light,
Arrives, goes, turns, and goes for good, unbidden:
For love a deep touch-stone—
Ishtar's alone.

"Hers was a fane the greatest of all others
And lowest too, save that of Father Time,
The shrine of Saturn, the hoar god who smothers
His infant sons in fell destruction's slime.
Because the rest are Ishtar's slaves: the master
That moves the sun, the empress of the moon,
The war-god fierce, the god who dreads disaster,
The festal banqueter who loves high-noon—
All who have come to earth
Through seas of birth

"Must deal with Ishtar beautiful and dread;
Behind her couch like beggars they must station
Till in her oval mirror she have read
Their fates in love. Now even such probation
Portrayed was there. Upon a bank of snow
With red raw feet was such a suitor standing.
He trembled much and on his hands did blow,
Frozen or parched at Ishtar's light commanding.
Hot, cold like snow, in turn
Her love doth burn.

"But vaster yet were portals deep and roomy
Of agate, onyx and of serpent stone
Which frowned about the temple black and gloomy
Where Saturn brooded, molded on his throne.
About his nape his arms were sadly twined.
His face was hid. A few locks white and scattered
Hung down between. To desperate change resigned
He crouched like one with whom they little mattered,
Things on the old earth's ball,
Great things or small!

"All wrought in fired earths, his back so broad
Shored up, it seemed, a main wall of the tower;
So, should he come to life and seize his sword,
Which like a sickle moon in her first hour
Shone by his side, the fabric o'er his neck
Had split right through. Then all the shrill gods' chiding
Had not availed to save their homes from wreck,
Nor all the strength within their spheres residing
Prop for a moment's tide
Their ruined pride!

"Above his head a cypress wreathed gaunt arms
Whereon there sate an ancient raven pair;
Into his ears these gray birds croaked their charms:
One told the future and kept green despair
At loss of just such days as still the other,
Memory by name, recounted croak by croak.
He seem'd to long the actual day to smother,
Live yesterday, to-morrow's tide invoke,
Rather than bear the sour
Present's dark hour.

"About the four sides of this empty shrine,
The wall's foot and the doorway lintels lining,
Ran a strange rounded beading, whose design
Was slowly seen, until at last the shining
False eyes of one huge snake revealed its form.
Around the fane it stretched, until o'ertaking
Its own thick tail, the motionless gray worm
Laid fast thereto. Above, through jungles breaking,
Were elephants whose feet
'Twere death to meet.

"Now in the space betwixt the tower and wall
Of horseshoe form that round about was builded
There stood a sacred grove, wherein grew tall
The windy hill-pines, whose long cones were gilded
To catch the sun's glint. On the other side,
A clump of granates, every apple covered
With silver like the moon's. These grew the pride
Of twice six priests elect, who always hovered
With careful guard around
The holy ground.

"A well there was deep sunken in each grove,
Of virtues sovereign and of magic seeming;
That of the sun among the pines did prove
Most strange by night. For then there glowed a gleaming
Deep in its entrails, as the tube it were
That star-men point against the glittering fires;
Therethrough the sun, though lost to upper air,
Could still be seen, the while the moon aspires
And sheds her still white rain
Across the plain.

" That other spring, bubbling among the apples,
Was all the moon's, and greatest was its might
When quivering heat from off the moist land dapples
The noon horizon with unsteady light.
Then, were the moon far wandered from the sky,
A sheen of silver in the darksome water
Pledged her return; she was not lost for aye,
But to the votary rightly that besought her
Would tell what bridal bed
The fates would spread.

" The twelve priests of the sun and moon were clad
In robes of separate hue, therein enwoven
Celestial signs. A mystic rite they had,
The sacred mold with golden mattocks cloven
To plant with grain, the crop wherefrom they gave
To all men of the earth because 'twas holy.
Landsmen from far the sacred seed did crave
And pilgrims fared to Babylonia solely
A handful to obtain
Of lucky grain.

"There had you stood in bowery Babylon
And gazed afar at that my loftiest wonder;
You had conjectured of the secrets done
In stone and brick the flashing tier-tints under.
The sun and moon shrines were my royal head;
Mars was the courage in my breast residing;
Mercury for my active heart stood stead:
Four greater gods were thus my frame dividing;
But the dread upmost shrine
My crown divine!

"My lower man was symboled by the three:
Jupiter, Venus, Saturn the deep-brooding;
Symbols they were of the wide-searching sea.
The two above, to my broad chest alluding,
Stood for the air. The still superior ones
For fire ethereal, that to which inferior
Is air and shines the brightest in the sun's
Omnipotent, all-gendering, deep interior.
Thus sprang the cone-shaped god
Up from the sod.

"A dreary secret has not yet been told.
Unknown to Ahram, at the eunuch's bidding,
With murder every story was befouled,
This place seven times by guile of Ahram ridding.
Bitsu had caused of each land one chief man
In brickwork to be walled, unfed, unwatered.
Ahram for all the wisdom of his plan
Heard not, absorbed, how the dry mouths of slaughtered
Chiefs, their far countries' pride,
For vengeance cried!

"It was an ancient custom of our land
Which Ahram cursed. Yet Bitsu showed me clearly
How their seven sprites like guardian souls would stand
Within their live entombments late and early.
Alas, 'twas they who lured the foulest jinns,
Wind-devils, demons and the ghosts uncanny
Whose clawlike hands could grapple where my sins
Had left within the pile too many a cranny–
Still shouldered out more wide
By those inside!

"'Twas done. East, west, north, south the humbled
nations
Departed, dazzled by my godlike pride.
My fame was blown to earth's remotest stations,
To seas remote and farthest mountain-side.
And as in bands they fled, their labors ended,
They saw my throne, bright with the jeweled glare,
By all the pomp of Babylon attended
Ever ascending by the spiral stair:
Curses in many a tongue
Backward they flung.

"I heard them not. I only marked the gleaming
Of countless cities and the endless chain
Of slaves and booty-laden camels streaming
From every land o'er the deep Shinar plain.
On high I saw the radiant vestal beckon
A brother god toward the celestial house.
Was it so strange that I should lawful reckon
Whatever passion in my breast might rouse?
The pile which tortures built
Was used for guilt.

"Before the threshold of the sun I bade
The pomp cry halt. Then from my dais golden
Leaping, alone prostration short I made
To fire directly to the sky beholden;
And all alone I scaled the highest peak
Where Esther stood in robe of many colors,
The hues whereof should fright the jinns who seek
To plague that holy one with spiteful dolors.
Wrapped in her priestess-hood
Fair Esther stood.

"Know you how Spring ascends the mountain valleys
In fragrant dances on the line of snows,
Enrobed in wind half-cool, half-warm, that dallies
With vineyards now, and now by snow peak blows?
When vernal hills are green with dainty guesses,
With hope, with promise of delicious pain,
And sun from udders of the glacier presses
The foamy milk, life to the thirsty plain—
Know you the zest that fills
Spring in the hills?

"Thus did it seem before the glowing face
Of Esther, captive-slave and priestess-royal,
In whom such keenness and such zest held place
With natural genius. And then first did loyal
Untainted thoughts for any woman rise
Within my cynic breast. 'Twas not embraces
I longed to win, but that in scornful eyes
I might perceive of tenderness the traces—
Yes, what none else should see,
All meant for me!

"She did not kneel. With looks that were a threat
She held of that most sacred shrine the portal;
Her head was godlike on her shoulders set
With poise indignant. Through her flowing kirtle
Shone a white knee that would not bend, though I,
The mightiest lord of earth, were there approaching;
Her blue-black silken hair about did fly
With kisses soft on clear white cheeks encroaching;
Anger more lovely made
This wondrous maid.

" Ah, little know ye, this lean shadow seeing,
The splendor of my port in that brave time ;
My stature grand with haughty look agreeing,
My regal gait, my awful nod sublime !
Esther was human. Could she fail to glow
At such as I was? Could she keep from dreaming
Of power like mine, of all I might bestow?
Could she restrain her restless brain from scheming
Triumphs that lay so near
Her own career?

" ' Nimrod ! ' she spake, in low voice ill-compressed,
' 'Tis well you come. Your slave has made good trial
Of all this office. Blandly your request
From Ahram came, backed by the mandate royal.
To him naught say I, but to you, the head,
Whom less I fear, albeit no less I'm humble,
To you I say: Spare me this golden bed.
Never again at lots obscure I'll grumble
So that you set me free
From hence to flee.

"'I am no priest or seer; I am a woman
Used to dear friends, to gossips, daily tasks.
Why should I house alone, or with inhuman
Faint spectres whom the incorporate ether masks?
Ahram but did your bidding. Oh, too well
He knows the mind to sway with turnings specious—
This is not life,' she cried, 'or else a hell
To one like me that finds an hour more precious
Which eyes of love have known,
Than years, alone!

"'Why should we women always live in fetters?
Why am I not a man, to come and go?
All men save one are equals, not my betters:
As hot they find the sun, as cold the snow.
What is this sex? A bugbear used to frighten
Poor women into servitude more base!
Oh, hard are men who do not seek to lighten
The burdens on the weaker of their race!
Yet, though I bend to might,
Death may set right

"'The grievous wrong that you and Ahram do—
O Nimrod, look me in the eyes and listen!
I swear by him who reigns within the blue
And her whose locks by all earth's rivers glisten,
By gods above the air, below the ground,
Your father's grave and by your beard most royal,
That, self-slain, as a spectre I will hound
You, Nimrod, to destruction, if denial
Of my petition slips
Your fateful lips!

"'I am alone,' she wailed, 'lone on the summit
Of this luxurious pile, more sad and poor
Than girls in hovels whose dull pulses quicken
When well-known fingers grope against the door.
All night I lie among the embroidered pillows
And hear the wind howl in the gates of brass,
I see it wave my robes like even billows
On Tigris when the south wind stamps the grass.
Cold, Nimrod, is the side
Of your god's bride.

"'Liar!' she cried, 'am I to waste my daytime
And bloom because you're king and choose to say
This god exists, or if he lives, his playtime
To such as me will stoop to give away?
Let me go hence, back to my hoary father;
Bid Ahram lead me to our sterile home,
Once more to live in tents, once more to gather
The hardy flocks that o'er the hillsides roam.
Our chiefs tempt not the skies—
And tell no lies.

"'Think you,' she raged, 'I fear your godlike power
Or tremble as I seize your sacred beard?
Behold, I care not if from off the tower
You cast me! To the last I still shall gird.
What have I done, that no sweet craving fingers
Shall grasp this barren and ungracious breast?
Without a son who o'er my ashes lingers
How shall it be when I have sunk to rest?
No one with gifts will bribe
The demon tribe.

"'Another priestess for this pageant summon
And drive me hence, I care not how forlorn,
So that I see again the pathways human,
Wed and be gay, bear, as I once was born,
And hear my children cry, laugh, sing and prattle.
Look how I rend my gold-embroidered vest!
Thus, Nimrod, king of kings and lord of battles,
Thus may your kingdom fare, if my request
Falls on a deafened ear.
Hear, Nimrod, hear!'

"How could I chide that loveliness unruly?
No god, I knew, could look on her unmoved;
Wherefore I was ashamed and glozed untruly,
Faltered, spoke soft, pleaded while I reproved.
Then from my neck I raised the chain of coral,
Whereon there hung my wondrous egg-shaped pearl,
Pearl that had force to soothe the fiercest quarrel,
Pearl that was torn from out the most perilous whirl
Where the Red Inlet shocks
Against the rocks.

"Pearls are the sign of Ishtar; since in Spring,
When love revertant all creation hallows,
At crack of dawn the chiming dewdrops fling
Their lustrous globes along the expectant shallows;
Those drops which sun with first all-quickening ray
Has struck athwart their mimic worlds of crystal
Are changed to pearl. Deep in the breathless bay
As flowers the pollen crave with trembling pistil
Yearn for those fine sea-bells
The wide-mouthed shells.

"Great pearls are lonely and their savage haunt
Is in the deep where shark and sea-wolf wander.
How many a diver paid with life for vaunt
Of seizing this! How many a merchant, fonder
Of gold than ease, has lost his all for it!
And even as beauty is an agent hallowed
To awe mind-troubles; so a poison-fit
Is broke if pearls are touched upon or swallowed;
Pearls will the bane out-thrust
Of diamond dust!

" Was it the pearl? I know not. But of Esther
The anger faded as from Elam's range
Fade into blue the spiteful clouds that pester
The virginal peaks. Rapturous was the change.
And she was calm, but in her eyes there brooded
A look that would not speak, yet crazed my brain,
A strange desire and bliss that lay yet hooded—
Bliss with a vast ambition in its train!
'Where is the god,' I cried,
'Would scorn this bride?'

" She smiled. And from the black depths of her eyes
A gleam shot forth. Find him, it seemed to murmur!
Shamed from the radiant maiden of the skies
Great Nimrod turned. A slave had been no firmer.
Went and took council with his priests and sages,
Questioned the oracles of cave and tree,
Pored o'er the mysteries on the breeze-blown pages
Of leaves that sibyls trace most cunningly;
Thence came the answers bold—
The gods ask gold!

IX

BITSU THE EUNUCH

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"'GOLD!' cried the priests. 'For each great god
an idol
Golden-robed, jeweled! Works of the fine-meshed
loom!
Then shall each enter as the groom to bridal
His marvelous wrought and most luxurious room.
That being done, the high god of the lightning
Shall condescend to his terrestrial couch
And then no more her lone torch vainly brightening
Shall Esther desolate and unwedded couch!'
Only dark Ahram's mood
Fierce waxed and rude.

"'What, not enough!' he cried; 'each planet tall
Is honored so, their every gift requited,
Gold and fine sculptures decking every wall
And images that folk may be delighted!
For hath not Ishtar idols, and old Time,
Saturn the wise? All else are far too mighty
That hands should shape their effigies sublime,
Our faith too feeble, minds obscure and flighty.
An idol only stains
The holiest fanes.

"'Be not, O king, deceived! Regard my warning.
Bitsu and these, now, as of old, are bent
On their own profit, not the tower's adorning
And long that gold on their own flesh be spent.
I hear their whispers, see their intrigues slow
To nip the bud of giant-like endeavors:
What pains doth not this eunuch sly bestow
On the chaste priestess! Gladly would he sever
The pure clean amity
'Twixt her and me!'

" More calm he spake : ' O Nimrod, stop your ears,
Nor stand estranged while plans are green and tender!
Wait till the grave and solid-making years
Your projects test, your edicts perfect render.
To noisome minds leave the foul idol brood
And all their trail of personal defilement :
Show to the nations who in ebb and flood
This centre pass no crowning state beguilement.
Try, through their worship, men's
Foulness to cleanse!

" ' But you, ye sleek priests, best beware ; I know
Your greed, your hate, your secret slimy plotting ;
Toward me, toward Nimrod, ye would coil your slow
Pale circles of deceit. While I, unwotting,
Would build a glorious throne, a race, a faith,
Ye would be laying sly eggs of destruction—
O filthy flies!—wherefrom the worm that slay'th
Comes to turn fair to inward foul corruption.
Rouse not the mountain bear!
Bitsu, have care! '

"It was the floor of hoary Saturn's fane,
Which then we held for grave and secret meeting.
Proud Ahram stand at my right hand had ta'en;
Bitsu, upon the stone his forehead beating,
Knelt on my left. Before my royal chair
Sat the twelve grove priests with their abject faces;
Listened, and weighing all our words with care,
Stirred not for terror from their several places.
Bitsu, his beardless head
Raising, thus said:

"'Ahram, great lord and right hand of the king!
Upon my brow unfairly lights displeasure.
Your wisdom, past the wit of man, should fling
Such thoughts aside. By your great soul you measure
Me, a poor worm, that's only half a man.
To fly like you too feeble is my spirit.
We lack the grasp to follow out your plan
Your virtue so transcends our humble merit.
Slaves, we take thought alone
For Nimrod's throne.

" 'Have we blasphemed the temples, groves and tower?
Nay, now! They show the glorious thought of twain:
Nimrod the god and his own prophet, our
Great lawgiver and most exhaustive brain.
But we are baser, to the people nearer;
We see their wants, we hear their cries of need,
We read the heart-beats of the vulgar clearer
For having lived administ'ring their creed.
This tower, some festal morn,
Will stand forlorn

" 'And Dagon's fane and Ishtar's grove at Ur
Shall win the masses to their gloomy porches.
Not all your might, O king of kings, can stir
The people from their old inveterate orgies!
The gods, they'll cry, must not be mocked for whims
Of Nimrod even, still less of a stranger!
These fears, O lord of lords, are not mere dreams;
We, humble slaves, but warn you of the danger
With a rash hand on such
Old faiths to touch!

"'Ahram is wise; Ahram is good and pure;
All must admire our prophet's quenchless spirit;
But who save he so spotless may endure?
Who is the fellow-angel can come near it?
All other men, to keep them from far worse,
At times must loose the rein and roll in orgies;
The vulgar ease their minds with blow and curse,
Since every man his evil demon urges
Out his good angel thrust,
To plunge in lust.

"'Wherefore great Ahram errs in charging greed
Upon these priests. They read the ancient annals:
First is the throne, and for the throne there's need
That worship run in the old slippery channels.
Next is the folk: crimes will be past belief
If holy revels do not draw the danger:
The robber, murderer, ravisher and thief
Will plague the people, fright away the stranger—
Pleasures no longer balk
Rebellious talk.

"'Thus do we rede. But O, we are most humble,
We only dare to raise for good our voice.
In counsels even the greatest mind may stumble;
'Tis best to take of many plans a choice.
Wondrous, O king, is this your lofty tower
And wide your fame among the nations blown;
Tribes no one knew are suppliants to your power;
Kings over sea ask friendship at your throne,
And of your wondrous seer
Farthest lands hear.

"'But as for me—poor me, too mean to tremble!
True, often I with radiant Esther talk;
But, that I blame the sage, or e'er dissemble
In any way, or seek his plans to balk
I here deny. It were enough for me
That Esther holds him high. Though neither woman
Nor man, alas! yet is not Bitsu free
To love great persons? has he nothing human?
And Esther, is not she
Barren like me?'

" He ceased and Ahram, white with hidden rage,
Reached out his clenched hand with indignant gesture:
He sought by art his fiery heart to assuage,
And yet, repressed, it shook his shaggy vesture.
As when among the woods the urchins track
A porcupine, and swiftly round it sweeping,
Harm it with stones, and all its hairy back
Bristles with wrath; so, at his enemy keeping
Ever apart and safe,
In like wise chafe

" Ahram's strong hands. His sharp-cut Adam's apple
Throbs in his throat; his large dark eyes, like stars
Rayed by long lashes, with his foemen grapple
Fierce as when Sirius all the desert chars.
His eagle nose snuffs battle; so a steed
Will look when neighing toward the gathering ravens;
His chin grows hard; his bent mouth straight as reed
And of his brow the steep and pallid heavens
Toss like the smooth cloud crust
Before the gust.

"'Slaves?' he repeated. 'Ay, we're all mere slaves,
And humble too. For all is not death given?
Yet who would sink so low, he no more craves
To rise an angel through the spheres of heaven?
We know the truth. Are we so weak and mean
As yield to falsehood through unmanly terror?
We lust. Why therefore should we wish to screen
The fact by lies, join falsehood unto error?
Should we not raise the yoke
That weighs the folk?

"'Behold this pile, like to the frame of man
Soaring from dust! On Space and Time 'tis founded
As all things human are. The cyclic plan
With sea-sprung Generation next we rounded.
The Belly then, that for the frame provides;
The Heart, that gives the fabric life and action;
The Chest, which on the others bravely rides;
The lower Head, that feels the moon's attraction.
Then we the Crown designed—
The glorious mind!

"'Shall we invert this order? Shall we stake
In grimy mold the palm-tree, bloom and branches,
Trying good dates from ropy roots to shake?
Shall we deny the truth because our paunches
May lack for honey cakes and Syrian wine?
Which should be leader, pray you,—brain, or belly?
Rather the sea shall wave above the pine
And mountains to their tops lie salt and shelly
Ere Nimrod, great and wise,
Govern through lies!

"'But judge between us, Nimrod. Now that he
Invites assault, what say you to the magic
This flattering eunuch plies to injure me?
Behold me here. A hundred times a tragic
Unholy death was shaped for me by him
Who yonder kneels a paragon of meekness!
Had he but won, within my every limb
Anguish had crept upon the heels of weakness
And I had gone in gloom
Down to the tomb.

"'For know, great king, this eunuch, love pretending,
Prayed of me hairs from chin and lip and head,
'Since they,' quoth he, 'their owner's wisdom lending,
Will turn to gold my own most spurious lead.'
I gave the hairs, for who am I to say
Such things are naught? and yet how little wotted
The foolish gift was meant my health to slay!
The hairs were begged by one who merely plotted
By treacheries high or low
Me to o'erthrow.

"'It was a night framed for vile deeds when I,
Prompted by bodings of a lurking evil,
Walked my own housetop and with careful eye
Beheld in this man's garden, like a devil
In form to see, a figure that was bowing
Before a flame. Moved by a silly fear,
Scaling the wall, I watched this eunuch mowing,
As maniacs mow, before an image drear
Molded of wax of bee
To feature me.

"'Anon from out the fire where they lay
He plucked his brazen pins all white and glowing,
And, muttering spells, in every shameful way
Pierced my wax effigy, on that bestowing
Whatever tortures he on me would vent.
At length when curse grew weary and the idol
Was crumbled sore, the rest was slowly spent
With blistering coals. And still the doll he'd sidle
Near to the gnawing flame
And cry my name.

"'This is the man, O king magnanimous,
Who talks of friendship and is quick at fawning!
Dream not I fear his magic. 'Tis not thus
Ahram is humbled. He who braved the yawning
Stark Himalayan hell can safely laugh
At old-wife sorceries of a nerveless eunuch!
He who has fashioned this enormous staff
For the king's fame on sun and star-text runic
Smiles at his juggler sticks
And petty tricks!'

" Then started Bitsu as if stung by asp :
' O King ! ' he cried, ' too far this prophet ventures.
If what he saw were true, he failed to grasp
The aim of what his gall so fiercely censures.
But let it pass. Upon this earth there be
Spirits in flesh that dream not they are evil,
Souls three times washed of hell-fire in the sea
Who dwell in great minds as in corn the weevil,
Festering, till all within
Is black with sin.

" ' At times they show their demonlike possession
Under dark brows that meet in cloudy stream ;
Their eyelids red, of sinister expression,
Half veil at heart a drop of lurid flame.
Surely against the Evil Eye 'tis rightful
To guard one's life ! O King, behold it there !
'Twas from such spell, unconscious, slow and frightful,
I shielded me, before the demoniac stare
Should drain of force my veins
With searching pains ! '

X

THE PRIDE OF INTELLECT

X

THE PRIDE OF INTELLECT

"THUS 'twixt the eunuch and the fiery sage
Was wordy battle—scarce they knew my presence.
Rising, I bade them cease their useless rage,
And, leant on Bitsu's shoulder, to the pleasance
Within the temple wall I passed in thought,
The while the priests withdrew them and the master
Into the fane retired. Anon he sought
The topmost shrine. With mien that spake disaster
To Esther's high abode
Wrathful he strode;

"Which Bitsu noting, an expressive motion
Louder than tongue addressed my wavering heart.
He dared no word, but yet he roused a notion
So sinister that through my every part
On swept the tide of jealousy! Magicians
Scarce drop a clear drop in a crystal flood
When all turns black. Within my brain suspicions
Made sudden revolution. All was rude
Boisterous, unreasoning hate,
Senseless as fate.

"I could not rest. 'Twixt love and hate's attraction
On Ahram's traces to the sun-god's fane
I needs must follow. Nowise by inaction
Could I unbind my bosom of its chain.
My dais rose in silence by the stair
Spiral and long that wound about the tower.
I had them bear me to the higher air
That sunshine colors to a later hour.
There where the moon was banned
I bid them stand

"And hide them till I come; then all alone,
While the last ray within the sun-fane mutters,
Upward I softly saunter where the tone
Of Ahram's voice through the faint music flutters,
As leaves will drop through cobwebs.
By the fane
I stand to catch the purport of their talking,
Nowise ashamed my royal ears to stain
With private matters, so that I am balking
One who too freely moved
Near her I loved.

"Esther was speaking: 'Ahram, king and lord,
Be patient, each one has his woe and trouble.
Right well I know how in your heart abhorred
Is all the pomp of priestcraft; all the double
Deceitful talk of augurs. But, alas!
In carrying out your mighty thoughts and measures
You crush the folk as elephants the grass
When to the lake they're marching.
All our pleasures
To you but folly seem,
A worthless dream.

"'Yet think of me. What life is this I lead?
For your sake I have tried it, and forever
Bade home and men farewell. And yet the steed,
However proud in trappings and however
Raised to a palace manger, longs to fly
Back to the desert where his kindred gather;
Yes, though his hoofs be gold, if he can spy
A loop-hole, he will break his chain, and rather
Parch, than enjoy the wave
That cools a slave.

"'And so I long for those old times, when we
Lolled by the summer tents, or, in the mountains,
Told at the fires of winter tales of glee:
How in the elms lurked maidens; in the fountains
Hid lovely boys whose laughter, sometimes heard,
Blent with the wind in tree-tops and the babble
Of brooks, with flutings of the unseen bird;
And some affirmed a faintly-falling gabble
Was speech of elves; and some,
The pheasant's drum.

"'O, leave this place and take me with you! Listen
To one whose heart forewarns her what is best!
This place is foul, although with gems it glistens;
This town, this nation, never can have rest.
Ahram, I know not clearly what I mean:
A horrid something steeps and wraps this tower!
All is so fair, and yet, I swear, unclean
Is every fane, and o'er this temple lower
Clouds that shall be by sun
Never undone.

"'You fear no demons, but alas for me!
What power have I to save me from possession
By sevenfold imps that dwell below the sea,
By earless devils deaf to all concession,
Sexless, who live far down in earth, at times
Rising with sulphurous thunders?
Though your magic
Should keep such off, not all the sun-god's chimes
Mayhap shall save your vestal from a tragic
Mentionless lot by night
Or death through fright

"'At hands of jinns who haunt the mountain peaks.
But yet again I say, the eyes of evil
Have smit this pile with taint. The temple reeks
With unseen blotches, cankers, that deceive all
You men of wisdom. Lips of baleful force
Over the whole have jabbered imprecations;
All is unwholesome, from the topmost course
Story by story to the grim foundations
Where fires of myrrh and nard
Earth's bosom charred.

"'Nay, smile not! You are greater, wiser far
Than woman e'er can be. Yet women often
Have vague forewarnings of a truth. A star
Is sometimes traced, though mists the outlines soften
To blurry haze, and eyes which see it best
May fail to mark the little lamps that beacon
Around great moving planets. In my breast
All is so dark my words must fail to quicken,
Alas, your skeptic ear;
Yet hear me, hear!'

"A silence fell. Viewed from that giddy height
The town embowered in trees, the country gleaming
With silvery crisscross of canals, the light
From myriad dwellings, and the sky-shine dreaming
On the broad river—all was visionary,
Sublime, unreal—a checker-board methought,
And I the giant, who, from cloudlands airy,
Conning the little squares, most lightly ought
With outstretched hand to gain
The mimic plain.

"Then Ahram spake: 'O dearly-loved, sweet Esther!
There was a time when need of speech like yours
Had never been. The good old times were blester,
Yet not so great as these. Ambition's lures
Once I would readily have scorned. But now
That, forced on me, a mighty task is given,
How can I linger, how refuse and how
Dream o'er again, as then I did, that heaven
Of wedded life with you
The lovely, true?

"'Nimrod had mercy on my captive lot
And raised me to be chief of all his servants,
Then every remnant of our nation got
A benefit thereafter. No observance
Of cringing habits gained me rank, but pure
Fidelity to what is best of spirit
In Nimrod and mankind. While stars endure
This world the same great maxims shall inherit:
Self-sacrifice and love
For all that move.

"'I am not harsh. Within this breast is beating
As warm a love for you as ever burned;
But if I yield to you, I shall be cheating
Millions of wretches, e'en like them that yearned
In vain for mercy to the skies, and raised
Their torn eyesockets to the ruthless great,
Or lingered, with injustice sickened, dazed
By crimes of kings, or bowed beneath the weight
Of priests, whose devilish faith
Grinds, crushes, slay'th.

"'What may not self-denial reach? Indulgence!
Alas, to what undoing does it come?
Where lives a woman in divine effulgence
Of sanctity like yours? Must you have home—
You—called to stand a monument of beauty,
Inward and outward, something raised o'er sin,
To whom her purity is more than duty—
A spiritual mother of those truths that win
Surely, as through the tides
Tigris outglides?

"'Behold yon ash-gray, just now rosy portals
Of the great sun! When from my cheeks the red
Fades and I go to join the wise immortals
That live indeed, though live men call them dead,
I will not leave a blemish on my soul;
I will not creep among the shades in terror;
I will not, sick of conscience, miss the goal;
I will not plead that crime is earthly error,
Whereto—not I alone—
All men are prone.

" 'But as the wheel of fifty golden spears,
Whirled by the sun-god, every morning pierces
The sluggish serpent of the fog and tears
Its shadowy hide before the light immerses
The landscape in a glory; so may I,
Breaking the rings of crawling ignorance,
Let fall the radiant light of truth from high,
Cast error back into the baser haunts
Where men are beasts, and fall
Deepest of all.

" 'And you? You will not be my comrade here,
My follower there, my spiritual full completion?
Your golden chains are heavy, but I fear
Far heavier are those chains which the magician
Bitsu the eunuch seeks to load you with.
Frighting with tales of goblins, his endeavor
Has been, will be, like worms that bore the pith
Of goodly shrubs, by little gnawings clever
To undermine my work.
Yea, he doth lurk

" 'In seeming harmless guise about my feet.
When there shall seem to him a crisis brewing
He'll slime my path. His crooked, small deceit
Will catch with Nimrod to my sure undoing.
And even you, who should be firm as steel
To all I plan, into your soul may enter
The thin edge of a doubt. Even you will feel
Hurt to your dear heart's golden-ruddy centre
Because of my neglect
Of you, elect.

" 'Yet, though I know my fate, no further shunning
Exists for me. Like him who hunts wild goats
And finds himself with swift momentum running
Across a knife-like ridge; beneath him floats,
Far down below, a cloud; aghast, he fears
To halt one instant, lest his nerve should alter;
Ever with restless ardor on he steers
In deadly terror lest his purpose falter;—
Thus do I haste forlorn
From morn to morn.

"'Watch me in pity. Add not your complaint
To all the burden of my coming battle.
Let me be hermit, stay yourself a saint,
And turn an adder's ear to all the tattle
Of eunuchs, slaves and slavish priests.
Ay, so
To speech of kings, should ever Nimrod, losing
His present awe, upon your state bestow
That flattery which resides in kingly choosing,—
Let him not cause light blame
To smirch your name.'

"'You are not just!' arose her passionate voice
As nightingales awake the shadowy thicket.
'You fear not demons, yet will show no choice
For one god more than other. Good or wicked
Are all alike to your sublime disdain.
If they exist not, why this sumptuous tower
Fashioned throughout by human sweat and pain?
What are these mummeries? what the bridal-dower
Bestowed within these gates
On one who waits?'

"'Listen!' he cried. 'This structure is for those
That see not what on each green leaf is written.
They must have gods and foes of gods; the blows
Of their own hands they fancy jinns have smitten.
They ask for temples; eight of them are few.
They long for idols, and when we deny them
Will worship pebbles, rags of sundry hue,
Or call on gods of pottery which they buy then
With half a harvest crop
From a mean shop.

"'But to the wise this talisman hath meaning
Most orderly, complete, sublime, eterne.
Each story imitates the gradual weaning
Of mind from matter. Herewithin discern
From tier to tier man's grosser thought of heaven,
As ore in flames, by gradual steps refined,
And in this fane superior to the seven
Know that I honor Him whose boundless mind
Exists in every groove
Where atoms move.

"'Now mark, tall spirit! These Chaldeans teach
The earth is like a shield all hollow under;
The sun, when he has run his daily reach,
Hissing divides the ocean waves asunder
And sinks to Hades. Thence by magic might
He hoists him through the eastern sea to lighten
The shades of one day more. Yet truly sight
Hath never seen one ocean quicklier brighten
Or one shore sparkle more
Than other shore.

"'We deem us wise. What if a tiny beetle,
An insect vile that haunts the lowest ground,
Should read the earth-shape better, should unseat all
The fancies sage Chaldeans dare propound?
Out of the bog the beetle molds a sphere
To house its eggs; with kind and clumsy ardor
Under the sun across the sandy mere
Rolls his small ball of germs the tricksy hoarder:
Thus is our earth revolved—
The problem solved.

"'This earth's a sphere that hangs in midmost heaven
And round it moves, or seems to move, the sun,
And where his rays bear down with heat most even
Life most prolific on his path is spun.
Life loves the sun. By him is life engendered,
Wherefore all life looks westward at day's end
And yearns that way, because the sun has rendered
One daylight more for timorous man to spend.
Westward all beings move
Inspired by love

"'Of light and life, fearful that each day's end
May prove the last. And so, did nothing stay them,
Westward the nations round the globe would wend,
Slowly but surely circling. What delay them?
Their own great vices! the unstinted store
Of wealth the sun piles on their way; the folly
Which makes them boast their riches, ay, and more—
The hatred of their neighbors who are wholly
Wanting in wealth and ease!
Such men as freeze

"'Far in the north by dismal hut and tent,
Alone, and battling with all natural rigors;
Such grow so strong that when the bands are rent
Which bind them in their tribes, the wretched diggers
Of winter roots, the fur-clad brutes, the men,
Who, starving, freezing, hate the southern nations,
Burst like the mined levee between the fen
And river! Then come wars and desolations
Like to which those were mild
When Nimrod spoiled.

"'They too desire the sun. They too will languish
For full-yeared summers and to southward march
With sateless maws, regardless of the anguish
That runs before them, of the wastes to parch
Their headlong hordes, and of the ancient towns
Their stupid force o'erthrows, still less the learning
Of patient men their ignorant violence drowns.
Thus do they southward wander, slaughtering, burning—
At last with rue their track
To wander back.

"'Thus, O fair Esther, by two instincts spurred
The mass of races south and westward jostle,
Slowly and gropingly; full oft they erred
From one straight path. As when two golf-men hustle
The golfing ball at once to south and west
And neither gains, but in the hurly-burly
Betwixt the two southwestward it is pressed,
So have the nations, gradually but surely,
Poured, nor as yet have ceased
From the northeast.

"'Your eyes are wide! Yea, what has this to do
With you and yours? Be patient. Every nation
That slays another in its turn must rue
The deed performed. There lies a just equation
In every act: the conquerer in turn
Is weakened, scattered, hurled in fragments broken
Back by the conquered; to each race hath stern
Revengeful Mars alternate courage spoken.
Through battles lost and won
Man blunders on.

" 'Have we not sat beside the foamy shore
Of our vast lake among the steadfast mountains
And watched the billows rise, stop, break and pour
Slanting along the beach their turbid fountains?
Thus do the nations, slanting on that zone
The sun puts round the earth, descend by torrents—
Only in ruins to dissolve when grown
Too proud, too rich, the scorn, the just abhorrence
Of One who loathes the flood
Of human blood!

" 'Now mark. Great Nimrod's line, descended far
From out the northeast ranges, smote the nations
Southward and westward till their cruel war
Reached the blue Nile. Here were their central stations
And hither back they rallied, hurled by those
Black warriors once their servants. Nimrod's power
Has shaped an empire here; but still as rose
The sun of yesterday and braved his hour,
Nimrod shall have his day,
Then pass away.

"'And we? This southern folk has laid its hand
Upon our necks; let us but wait, disasters
Are sure to reach our conquerors, and the land
That knew us slaves shall cringe to us as masters.
But where's the good? Shall we remain the sport
Of Mars, who drives now this way, now the other?
Brains are the only weapons, and that fort
No foot can storm, no wave nor flame can smother,
Is built in hearts that brood
Only on good.

"'Know then that I was chosen, 'gainst my will,
To help mankind through Nimrod's mighty power,
Raise them from groveling instincts and to fill
Their stubborn hearts with kindness. 'Tis the dower
Fate has allotted me. Within my hand
I bear my life; but, while the chance is given,
Ahram shall build his projects, though the sand
Be shifty underneath. They are the leaven
That saves great Nimrod's name
From lasting shame.

"'So shall this nation by my projects led
Know greatness, peace and glorious progress; even
As when the trade-winds blow and sails are spread
And merchantmen, by changeless breezes driven,
Fare boldly o'er the laughing sea; their nests
When halcyons build in safety on the waters,
When infinite peaceful freshness cools and rests
After long speechless drought Arabia's daughters:
So shall each human hive
Through me revive!'

XI

A WOMAN'S POWER

XI

A WOMAN'S POWER

"'ALAS!' cried Esther, 'what have these to do
With you and me? Think you, a single mower
Can reap Euphrates valley? no, not you,
Nor any man by work however sour
Can compass it. To your own kin, to me
First duties owing are. You do so muffle
Your mind in clouds heroic, that you see
Shapes that exist not, arguments that shuffle
With cruel facts, as when
Magic blinds men!'

"'Nay, hear me out!' cried Ahram. 'Once for all
Being here, perforce we must our lots encounter.
To do men good, no thought, no act must fall
Unused for careful ends. We may not saunter
At ease through life with children at the knee,
A tender spouse against our shoulders leaning.
Ourselves a perfect sacrifice must be:
All thoughts like that from out our bosoms weaning
We must march on alone
With hearts like stone.

"'Yet with a sacrifice we gain a payment
Far higher than aught else that men have known,
Far richer than brown gold or silken raiment,
Ay, loftier, sweeter than the happy throne
Of those who live to love as other men.
For loving man or woman is a peril;
But, love mankind! ah, then you're happy, then
You sow the grain that never can be sterile,
Though on ungrateful ground
The seed be found.

" 'The loftiest love of human twain—what is it
But earthy dross entire or else in part?
Love of mankind exhales a scent exquisite
As winds that blow from out the snowy heart
Of clear pure mountains. Not one selfish taint
Of marsh-bred flowers, and not an amorous breathing
Of lovesick trees, nor one narcotic plaint
Such as from out the lily's calix seething,
Tells that the lily's soul,
So white, is foul!

" 'How are we nobler than the beasts and birds,
The wanton fishes and the selfish flowers?
He who his loins against that passion girds
Can rightly claim his manhood. He who lowers
Himself to beasts shall die like them. But those
Who fight themselves and keep that demon under,
For them at last no heat of sun, no snows,
No lightning-bolt, no watery waste shall sunder
From the great prize, the throne
On Wisdom's stone.

"'Yet listen, Esther, it may be that later,
Our tasks once done and Nimrod's favor lost,
Inferior duties may usurp the greater
And we, released from those high fates which crossed
Our peaceful ways, may see once more the hills,
Our childhood's cradle, may inhale the ether
Life-lengthener, joy and antidote to ills
Which blows about our home. When that comes neither
Wisdom shall lure nor pride
Me from your side!'

"With that, O mortals, from his seat uprose
Wise Ahram, comforted in heart, and ready
To face the world again. As honey flows
From fragrant lips of flow'rs to lure the steady,
Straight-wingèd bees from off the appointed path
Esther, her utterance thick with honeyed languor,
Murmured his name: 'Ahram! Ay me! and hath
Your heart no room for aught but schemes and anger?
Have you no vein that's warm?
See this bare arm

"'How shapely, white, coursed with blue veins a-tingle
With love for you! Now fancy it all dry
Of light and life: Such is the man who, single,
Thinks to fulfill a brain-sick destiny!
Give o'er such thoughts heroic! Feel my heart
Bounding against my side as though to sever
The space, the cruel gap, the gulfs that part
One sphere of love in twain. If you were ever
True, sever not your face
From my embrace!

"'But love me rightly, in a human fashion,
Nor seek to ape the gods whom pride doth stay,
And they not always, from a natural passion.
Love is a birthright. He who love would slay
Is punished sore with thousand starting troubles!
Nor think to set yourself o'er rules that bind,
Surely as sightless death befalleth bubbles,
The man who scorns the rights of womankind.
Ahram, respect in me
Love's majesty!'

" Then through a fissure of the wall I saw
What drove me frantic with crushed love and jealous:
Around a sunburnt neck white lilies draw
A throbbing circle; in a living trellis
Of arms and silken hair is Ahram bound,
Restless, yet yielding to the fascination;
His bow-shaped, parted lips give forth no sound,
But in his starlike eyes a supplication
Kneels to her wayward face
And begs for grace.

" But she with one hand closes up those orbs
And on his lips pours her whole soul in passion:
The blissful pressure every vein absorbs
In yearning pain. From him could sculptors fashion
The man who sees in forest drear and lone
The fragrant witch-snake, who, around him ringing
Her aromatic coils, so dear has grown
He smiles, aware that death's against him clinging.
Thus did forgetful sleep
Wise Ahram steep

"One moment and no more. Then back he started,
Awake to fate and all the crime he dreamed.
With trembling hand the embrace delicious parted
And now to fly resolved and now he seemed
Resolved to stay and ply a cruel tongue.
But all in vain. Behind his sinewy members
Soft ambush lay, and round his shoulders hung
A lithe and swaying form. Those ash-grown embers
Of his old fiery love—
He felt them move.

"'Nay, I must go!' he cried. 'Ah, no, no—cruel!'
'You know not what you ask!'—'I claim your love!'—
'Take these and these!'—Those kisses were but fuel
To her long starving flame. 'By sky above,
By earth below and those great souls that hover
Betwixt them both, I will not let you go
Till you affirm that still you are my lover,
Till on your lips and in your eyes you show
I am your only pride,
Your love, your bride!'

"'You are!' he cried, alternate pale and red.
'I loved you more than self and thought to smother
The thing for good of men. It seemed so dead
I hoped to touch you gently as a brother
A sister greets. Far otherwise it is.
Alas for me! I am poor clay, I tremble.
Where is the antidote against such bliss?
You are unearthly! How can I dissemble
With words when blushes speak
Upon my cheek?'

"Thereat he made to clasp her tighter yet;
But she, afraid, or as a prudent winner,
Got her away and soon a space had set
Betwixt them both. Like a detected sinner
Wise Ahram stands; but next, as one who feels
A load withdrawn, nor yet a moment speaking,
Guiltily, wanly looking back, he steals
Off to the door. But still her eyes keep seeking
Lures for his quick return:
Like brands they burn.

" One instant there he stood. 'You've humbled me
Who weened me proof against my lower nature.
I blame not you. I go myself to free
From stings of love, from thought of every feature
Of your too ardent form. Alas, you rouse
The dragon passion that obscures the shining
Of sunlike virtue. What no law allows
May hap ere morn. But when your dreams come twining
About your head, beware
I am not there!'

" He fled, and Esther with her torchlike eyes
Seemed still his vanished features to peruse.
'Ah!' murmured she, 'what blissful terror flies
Through every limb! Those words I cannot choose
But thus translate: Great Ahram has surrendered!
This very night, who knows? we shall be one.
This very night, O victory! shall have rendered
Twin hearts too glad that they should greet a sun
That frights too soon, too soon
The lovelorn moon.'

XII

THE DEED OF NIMROD

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THE DEED OF NIMROD

"Ay me! and where was I? Upon them gazing
My blood was fire, my brain a whirling flame.
Her visage was a spell; her form was crazing
My every instinct without care for shame.
I could have sprung on my departing servant
And torn him limb from limb.
I could have laid
On her a ruthless hand. Then vainly fervent
Wild, maiden prayers my furious love had stayed!
Yet which way could I turn
To cool my burn?

" Burst forth? reveal myself a vile eavesdropper?
Cast Nimrod up to Ahram's silent scorn?
Arouse in Esther an aversion proper
Toward one of dignity so all-forlorn?
With halting step a-tiptoe down I stole
Revolving close a thousand vagrant fancies,
How to possess her fond and inmost soul,
How to make head against the o'erwhelming chances,
Setting 'gainst Ahram's claim
My royal name.

" Thus found I Bitsu. 'Counsel me,' I said,
'And you shall never live to rue the action,
Counsel me Esther to my royal bed,
But not unwilling. Let my own attraction
Or that of power as queen and only spouse
Urge her to violate the sacred sealing
Whereby she's sealed and all her god-borne vows!
Give me relief, for this my brain is reeling
With her great loveliness,
Her sweet distress!'

"Thereat the swarthy eunuch turned so pale
That I did laugh. 'What now, thou beast unhuman!
Hast thou a heart, and can thy soul avail
To love with manliness a glorious woman?'—
'Nimrod!' he cried, 'Great god of heaven and earth,
Jeer not your slave. I do love Esther truly:
No one so well can prize her matchless worth
For no ignoble thought doth wound unduly
Her perfect purity,
Her chastity.

"'Give me but time to think!'—'Time is for slaves.—
'She will not hear your suit.'—'She must. Consider!'—
'I know not what to rede.'—'Why then, my braves
Shall have their sport with you!'—
'O godlike bidder,
Have mercy on a man who loves, next you,
The one you love, with deep respect and honor.'—
'I have, for you live yet! 'Twere well I slew
Ten thousand such, for that they looked upon her!
Think on it, Bitsu; see,
It cannot be

"'But that, once queen, fair Esther will discover
How vast a height she stands above the swarm
Of this world's women. Then her godlike lover
And faithful eunuch will receive her warm
Heart-given thanks; those windy words the sage
Has stuffed her with will seem the silliest fables
And you shall form, in your decrepit age,
Our chosen counsellor, seated at our tables,
Third in our mighty realm,
Close to the helm!'

"That struck. Sly Bitsu, in a flash perceiving
The fall of Ahram and his own tall gain,
Esther's reward when she had done with grieving
For Ahram's loss, and more, the perilous strain
On my unruly passions, in the caves
Of his unholy fancy spawned a hideous
And tempting plot that oiled the boiling waves
Of passion with smooth hope. What turns insidious
Of argument I wove
To prop my love!

"Then straight I hied me to my palace, clamorous
For wine and roses, dancers and the slaves
Who stir the languid pulse with hymnals amorous
Of wave-borne Ishtar and the song that raves
Of love new loves begetting. And soothsayers
Pondered what hidden fortune should be mine
Ere break of day, if, after gifts and prayers
In Friday's house, I should another shrine
Brave with unhallowed love
And seize its dove.

"'Great,' cried the wizards, 'is your star to-night
With Venus standing in conjunction patent.
Whate'er you plan will surely turn to right.
In you, if love you ask, success is latent
Such as you never dreamt since life began!'
Whereat made bold, with Bitsu and no other,
When night had long surpassed her midmost span,
I sought the temple of Ishtar the god's mother.
There, vowing gifts, I sighed
And suppliant cried:

"'Ishtar! Anunit! Thou who like to fire
O'er the fallows dawnest on benighted men;
Ishtar! Anunit! Gladdener of the sire,
He that long has childless and unfruitful lain;
Ishtar! Anunit! Stealthy as hyænas,
Bold as stalks the lion marching on his prey;
Ishtar! Anunit! From creation seen as
Goddess of the four skies, whom the gods obey:
Ponder in thy majesty
All I wrought for thee!

"'Ishtar! Anunit! We the temple widest
Save alone thy father's here endowed to thee;
Ishtar! Anunit! here perchance residest
Thou whose servant day is, heaven thy canopy.
Ishtar! Anunit! Still the mountains hurtle
'Neath the hand that oft the vault of sky unlocks;
Ishtar! Anunit! Thou whose rains are fertile,
Dawner, great begetter of life in arid rocks,
Ponder in thy majesty
All I wrought for thee!'

" One watch before the dawn! And Babylon
Lay sunken fathom-deep within the shimmer
Of a vast fairy sea which slowly won
Its life from out the rivers by the glimmer
Of a strange moon.
Around the tower there stole
An inlet from the feathery inundation;
Here was an isle pyramidal; a shoal
Was there of temples, as if no salvation
From that weird flood were found
Elsewhere o'er ground.

" Alone we seemed, alone upon an isle,
Sweet slumbering Esther and one man, left over
From all earth's myriads! What was then worth while,
Save the last loved one and her fated lover?
Bride of the sky? Surely, was I not god
As great as any known, from sun-god onward?
If greater lived, why let him with a nod
My plans frustrate, yes, let him hurl me downward
Headlong from temples built
For good, or guilt!

" If Babylon lay fettered in a spell
  Of midnight magic, so, too, Nimrod wandered
Dazed by the fogs of devilish lust that well
  From depths of souls unhappy which have pandered
To a weak will. Nerved for a desperate deed
  I marched wide-eyed to take a sleeping city.
The more I dwelt upon the crime my speed
  Grew more. I hastened to forestall my pity.
    Ghost-like my shame I bore
    From floor to floor.

" Far to the south the royal stars, the Crown
  Bade me be king. Above my head Orion
Those stars of mine in aidance showered down
  Nerve and address. From palace court a lion
Caged for my sport lifted his awful voice,
  And with a whisper through the tower ever
Lapsed the sweet waters where with silvery noise
  They purged each story ere they found the river,
    Whenceforward sevenfold
    Holier it rolled.

"Yet did I often linger by the way:
Meseems that voices from the scampering geckos
Reach my scared ear; meseems that sounds betray
My purpose, that my footsteps wake the echoes
The loudlier now I strive to make them lighter,
And that the beating of my timorous heart—
Poor battering heart of Nimrod the fierce fighter!—
Roars like a drum, whereat from sleep might start
A slumbering girl—to lame
Nimrod with shame!

"The hanging parted—there upon a couch
In richness worth a kingdom lay the maiden
Bathed in dim light. The night-lamps near her crouch
In jars of jadestone with incisings laden.
Breathless she looks, and yet most quick. Her lips
Half parted as to speak. Her eyelids tender
Scarce shut; her bosom bared; her lovely hips
Marred by fine gossamer-linen folds that render
Whiter the silvery skin
That shines within.

"I stood upon the holiest spot of all
Within my kingdoms, in the shrine devoted
To him who most unbearably lets fall
His wrath upon mankind. Surely I doted
When thus to that forbidden couch I stole
Whereon she lay, the girl whom gods were witness
As set aside for vestal. My fierce soul
Curdled with terror. 'It would be in fitness
With my just meed,' I said,
'If I fell dead!'

"Was she awake? . . . There seemed a smile to play
About the clear curved eyebrows and the bended
And pouting lips. Her lashes seemed to stray
Ranged on the fair cheek with a grace intended.
Pink were her ears, and through the alabaster
Of neighboring parts the red was spreading still.
She lay there waiting for a heavenly master
To say the word, when, buoyant to his will,
Up she would float and leave
Mortals to grieve.

"Was she aware? . . . The firm young virgin bosoms
Dinted by slender forearm, which did seem
Most like two snowballs topped with sweet-briar blossoms,
Nor heaved in long-drawn waves, as when the dream
Is deep, unvexed; nor was it swayed, the pool
In whose clear white shone the sweet pearl, her navel,
With gentle pulses answering to the rule
Of her soft breathing! . . . Ah, who may unravel
The thoughts, or keen, or blind
Of womankind?

"She is awake! . . . Her shapely wondrous thighs
Lie far too firm, and the slim legs, round-ankled,
Stretch their fine curves straightforward thoughtfulwise.
She breathes like one in whom there never rankled
Suspicion of an equal, who knows well
Her power, and though man gaze upon her glories
Moves not, her pride being wide as gates of hell,—
One who is glad because her beauty worries
Men that insanely grope
Toward a false hope.

" Nay, she *doth* sleep! . . . She sleeps as angels might
Secure in Paradise, and all the quiet
That armors virtuous minds. The spot so white,
Lucent and smooth, nor on the arm, yet nigh it,
Nor quite upon the breast, has such a lustre
It seems of opal. In that dusk profound
Her jet-black hair in many a blooming cluster
Takes purplish hues; upon which royal ground
White as a swan afloat
Swims her round throat.

" Three steps, no more! and I was by her side
Tingling with warmth of her delicious body;
Heard of her fragrant breath the balmy tide
Run to and fro, in time with pulses ruddy
Of veins celestial; quaked with mortal dread
Lest the least noise my victim should be waking;
Glanced o'er my shoulder, down and overhead
Lest wrathful sprite his vengeance might be taking,
And gasped as if a wraith
Choked my poor breath.

"So craven stood I, nowise sure that she
Who lay there, tempting, warm and almost smiling,
Might not be conscious of my agony
Of love and fear. But if she were, no whiling
Was needful now. But if not, what would hap
When I with ruthless violence should trouble
Those spheres untouched before, my strong arms wrap
That lily candid in enchainments double
Of sin and luxury
She might not flee?

"There was a time, when warring in the hills
With fierce Carduchians I was ambushed, hunted
And hurled toward an abyss. Still memory thrills
To think of how, when sword and spear were blunted
With deathful blows, no choice at last remained
Save from the cliff to throw myself; preferring
To court death so than surely to be slain,
Honor too mighty on my foes conferring.
There did I doubting wait
In wan debate;

"Yet was the later anguish greater far.
Anon my hand toward the jade lampstand hurried,
Then paused because my senses were at war.
In her great loveliness my eyes lay buried,
And cried the light should stay!
My lips were wroth,
That they so long from her ripe lips were parted.
My knees, that ne'er before had known of sloth,
Shook, yet with longing toward their mistress started.
O'er all, my coward soul
Strained for control!

"One hand approached the lamp, while knees were bent
In adoration of her grace; its fellow
Yearning to snap the last impediment
Moved toward her bosom.
Hark! what murmurs mellow
Float on her lips? 'At last to claim his right
Comes my true lord!' But eyes are fast shut, neither
Does feature change nor any awakening light
Break the calm glory of the slumbrous breather.
Sudden . . . the light was crossed! . . .
Esther was lost."

XIII

HAND-OF-SULTAN

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HAND-OF-SULTAN

TENSE was the silence o'er that crumbly mound
When Nimrod from his long recital stinted.
Ali and Gourred on the tile-strewn ground
Sat close embraced. Then first they marked how glinted
A wondrous pallor on the horizon east
And knew the dayspring nigh ; that while the demon
Waxed to a bulgy height, and, sighing, ceased
With tale half told. But Gourred sweet, a woman
Most curious, durst implore
Nimrod for more.

"Barbarians," quoth the great ghost at the last,
"I need no urging my strange tale to finish,
But ask that you, whenso the sun is passed
The midnight's nadir, my old pain diminish
By listening to the rest I yearn to tell.
Now while I turn me to my desert prison
See ye revolve my words and actions well!
Lo! as I speak the cruel sun has risen
And with disdainful light
Hurls me from sight."

O'er Phraat the holy, past the Shushan hills,
The red had grown, and now the fog-belt whitened.
His shadowy bulk was honeycombed as rills
Will mine a snowbank. Ever more it lightened
Till where great Nimrod stood to ease his mind
A roll of mist curled upward, slowly floated
Off toward the waste. Ever with arms entwined,
Sunk in a stupor, on the mist-wreath gloated
Gourred and Sayid. Then
Noise rose of men.

The light still grows, and on the sherdy plain
Where to old dawns a brilliant city started
Points glitter. What—has Babel come again?
Thus, while their lips in anxious stare are parted
Bursts the new sun all flaming on the mound,
Bathes them, drops lower, then on lances hovers
Near and below. There comes a shouting sound—
At last the foe has found the pilgrim lovers!
Jeering the horsemen sweep
Toward the old keep.

How long shall cowards flourish, and how long
The tender brow of day grow tough and brazen
With gazing on the never-ending wrong
Man heaps on man? In what age shall the blazon
Of Lord Protector to the meek be one
That all outcrows the haughtiest war-stained title,
Or bannerets earned by service baselier done,
Or pompous shields, of lucre the requital?
When shall men feel in meekness
The strength of weakness?

A million times the sun with equal care
And patient visage cheered the deep-grooved valley.
The millionth time, O sight to cause despair!
The scene must needs with all the foregone tally.
For in the arms of a dark-featured rider
Was Gourred borne; nor could she shrink away;
While Ali, bruised and pinioned, marched beside her
Half stripped, and bleeding from the uncalled-for fray.
Coarse phrase and villainous jeers
Burned in their ears.

Before the horseman, as a leader, yet
In deadly fear of men so loud and reckless
Upon an ass a tremulous man was set,
Who now that lady eyed and now the necklace
Of antique beads which with his sordid hand
He'd caught from Gourred's lovely curving shoulders.
What was his thought? What had his cunning planned?
None knew among those ignorant beholders
Who had been safely fain
A gift to gain.

And on they trail across the seed-pearl rain
Of melody the larks pour from the zenith
Washing their bosoms of the earthy stain
Won while the night upon her star-throne queeneth.
The datepalm, proud of beauty and of use,
Waves a kind welcome to the passers sorry,
As being too gentle to perceive the clues
Of their strange motions. Only aromas myrrhy
Rise from the hurrying hoofs
As mild reproofs.

The buffalo that on the stagnant pool
  Sways his broad muzzle like an alligator
To stare surprise; the savage boars that rule
  In jungles dense on Tigris, as the satyr
Ruled of old time; the treacherous maneless lion
  Hunted of Nimrod, and the abhorrent wolf,
The fox's bastard, and the watchdog's scion,
  Who changes form poor woodmen to engulf—
    None, such was Gourred's charm,
    Had done them harm.

Nor these wild Arabs that with brandished spears
  Had scaled the height by two pale saints defended
Had acted so, nor blows and brutal jeers
  Upon these lambs of innocence expended,
Stood not behind them a most shameless force,
  One that makes vulgar, smirches still the cleanly
And dries each generous impulse at the source. . .
  Dull souls, unable to decipher keenly
    This truth: There's none so bold
    Keeps ill-earned gold.

Thus to the town of Hillah are they come.
But, at their advent, the bazaar's loose rabble
Hoot and swarm fast. So bees with venomous hum
Swarm round a thievish Death's-head moth and squabble
Who shall sting first. But Hand-of-Sultan, he
Who rode the ass, had cast about sweet Gourred
That veil she scorned, lest the low folk should see
And feel the heavenly splendor of her forehead
And turn from foes to friends
Against his ends.

The Kadi of the town was his ally;
It boots not wherefore, if it were not honest.
Dragging the saints to his divan, the cry
Unmanly rose:
"O Kadi, thou that shonest
So many years a not inferior sun
To Judge Hakeem, thy musklike reputation
Smells sweet with the Pasha, who forms but one
With Scheik-oul-Islam, fountain of salvation.
Here on thy judgment stone
I claim mine own.

"Hamsa of Hillah, who to all the tribes
Art known for judgments upright and unswerving,
Behold an unbeliever who with gibes
Smirches the name of the Prophet! Undeserving
Is he of life, for odious blasphemies.
But that is nothing to mine aim. Consider
Only this woman; for the Sultan's ease
With hard-won means I bought, a generous bidder,
Her from her master here
With conscience clear.

"And when methought he stept aside to write
A bill of sale, behold, with shameless forehead
Forth had he fled into the waste and night,
And only now I found him and this Gourred,
My purchased slave, in hiding on the mound
Where stands the keep in ruins. Wisest Kadi,
I claim my slave, or else my thousand pound;
My slave the rather, for with her no lady
At Stamboul can compare
She is so fair.

"The money let him have. My witnesses
Are ready. Is it right, a tricky Persian
Should cheat poor Hand-of-Sultan of his fees?
I charge you listen, and whatever version
This man of guile may frame, believe him not.
A pretty pass, when the hard-working trader
Pays and gets no return! For bought is bought
And he'd no right to take her or persuade her
When the price once was told,
The fair slave sold."

But while his cone-shaped bonnet the wise Kadi
Donned with an air of virtue, from her face
Swept her long veil that sorely injured lady
And on the justice poured her sun-bright grace.
Mildly she spoke. "My lord judge, it would seem
This slaver deems himself a marvelous jurist,
If that to prove his crazy charge he dream;
For who is sure, although his right be surest?
And he is wondrous bold
Pilgrims to hold

"Who look no home to have, no friends, no wealth!
True is it that he made the scandalous offer
To this my lord and comrade, me by stealth
Conveying to Stamboul, to fill their coffer
With proceeds of my freedom basely sold.
What answer was I need not say. The rather
Hear who he is to whom his slave-curst gold
This blind man tendered, from the tale to gather
The crime that he has done,
Infamy won.

"He who stands there abused and fettered sore
Has in his veins the blood of the Prophet! Hasten
Ye Arabs rude a Sayid to adore!
See you not? even Hand-of-Sultan, brazen
Jew that he is, begins to tremble. Well,
Loosen his bonds! Now, on this Mirza Sayid
Ali Mohammed, came at birth the spell
That hung about the Prophet; for there playèd
About him balsamed air,
Odors most rare.

"For he was set apart of Allah, light
By thought and pen upon the world to lavish.
The turban green he wears not, though his right,
As I wear not a veil; since just such slavish
Badges are they of vices in our peoples.
For Mollahs, Kadis, great men all and some
On their pure lives must stand like deep-base steeples—
Woman, no more a slave,
Learn to be brave.

"We fight for freedom. We do not rely
On rights prescriptive, such as both inherit.
Teaching the gospel of this Prophet high
From God revealed through his abounding merit,
Where Meccawards the Persian pilgrims throng
We preach our faith—the first faith great Mohammed
Taught at Medina clean of blood and wrong.
Nor have we fled, nor have we hid, nor shammèd,
Nor lied, nor bought, nor sold,
Nor touched his gold.

"But what grips he within his greedy talons
Thin, long and dry, predacious like a bird's?
It is my rosary which he did not balance
To snatch from me! What use is there of words
To argue need of change in all the laws
That hamper women in the Moslem nations,
When, like the lambkin in the cruel claws
Of vulture, she who has no strong relations,
Is seized with blow and scoff,
Bound, hurried off

"To feed the lust of some great man, and rouse
In harems anguish, hatred and contention,
Perhaps to cause the breakage of deep vows
Or sow between stepchildren fierce contention;
Adding to burdens of the humble; wasting
On vanities the taxes of a town;
Through sloth and intrigue and divorces hasting
From plane to plane forever down and down—
Mother of Moslem child
Bartered and soiled!—

"What rule is that in early years whereunder
Our offspring spoil? What school is it for them
Where gluttony, lies and intrigue, heartbreak, blunder
Still alternate? One man as well might stem
The waves of ocean with his feeble arms
As rear his children virtuous in a harem.
So many wives, and just so many harms!
But since 'tis ignorance keeps them bad, alarum
Should beat in every place
To save the race

"From utter rot, by holding every man
To his one wife and teaching her the beauty
Of knowledge and high thoughts, the daily plan
Of work, the sweets of cleanliness and duty.
And therewithal, for sake of those who earned
Such freedom, loosen wives from shameful fetters
Of veils and cloistered walls! For these are spurned
Daily by wicked women, while their betters
Languish within the rope
Sans love, sans hope!

XIV

THE DERVISH

XIV

THE DERVISH

"GIVE leave" cried Hand-of-Sultan, for he fancied
The judge was moved by eloquence and looks,
"'Twas magic that ye two were at, when chancèd
My Arabs on your track. In holy books
Stands written, Harut-Marut demons are
That haunt the mound they call of Nimroud yonder.
This talisman I feared would prove a bar
To holding you, lest you from me should wander
And by those demons led
Again have fled.

"And trust not, Kadi, this bold she-magician!
What proof is given we have a Sayid here?
Do Sayids, then, blaspheme and rouse sedition?
With wine and women, then, are they austere?"
But while he spake behind his ample robe
He toward the Kadi four thin claws extended
Which signified, No more this matter probe,
And four pounds are your fee! And thus he ended.
So eloquent, they say,
Is yellow clay

Which has no tongue and yet all tongues can silence!
"The case is grave," the worthy judge replied,
"If she is yours, why did you him such violence?
Why so much force, if right be on your side?
I must look farther in the case. Speak out
You that are said to be a prophet. Utter
Your thought, nor longer dream, nor stare about,
Nor, like to men that talk in trances, mutter!"—
Through Ali's purple eyes
There shot surprise

"But speech came not; for in the attentive gang
Of ruffians of the bazaar and Arab shepherds
A tattered youth of piteous visage sprang
Light as o'er hurdles vault the beauteous leopards.
Lovely he was, for all his rags and dirt,
And seized the sight with pleasure and with pity;
A blood-soaked bandage told his feet were hurt.
He turned about with motion quick and witty,
And drew within the fold
A Dervish old.

"The Dervish had a mien of majesty
Conscious, like one who bears great news. Most haughty
His nod was. Face and bearing somewhat free
Brought low salaams from that slave-trader naughty,
And made the Kadi him a place assign
On his own carpet. Likewise by his turban
Believers read the unmistaking sign
That oft he'd been to Mecca. Then more urban
He did the Kadi greet
And took his seat.

"Welcome, O holy pilgrim from afar,"
The justice said, "You come when most is wanted
One who is practiced in the subtle war
Of wits that scholars wage within the vaunted
Halls of right Moslem learning. It is true
That Hand-of-Sultan claims this fair-faced woman
As his bought slave. But now there's naught to do;
What better were, to pass the time, than summon
These doctors to dispute
Religion's root?

"It likes me well so," condescended he,
"For I have heard the lady's strange oration;
But," quoth the Dervish, "is it right that we
Before a Jew of mysteries make relation
Sacred to Moslem only? Heretics
Must be confuted; but for unbelievers
There is no hope, and 'tis most wrong to mix
Discourse before such scoffers and deceivers
As Jews and Christians are.
I come from far

"With him my son and bring in yonder sack
Broidered thus richly jewels that are destined
For Hamsa, Kadi of Hillah; but my back
Soon must I turn on this well-built predestined
Illustrious town, of whom the inhabitants
Are famed for learning, courage and free-giving.
I cannot stay, I must avoid the haunts
Of luxury; for always I am living
On dry bread and the stale
Of desert well."

At this the justice opened wide his eyes.
Mashallah, was his thought, at last, uncourted,
Has luck fallen to you, Hamsa? have your wise
Enactments far as Stamboul been reported?
Are you about to be Hakeem, Emir—
Pasha perhaps? Upon his townsmen gloated
This justice vain and strove unmoved to appear;
Then glared on Gourred while in heart he doted:
"A better wife than she
I may not see."

"True, holy man!" broke in the wily Jew,
"I am not one to hear the secret proffers
Of argument, called *ketman*, which the few
And friendly make between them. But no scoffers
Are tribes of Judah 'gainst your Moslem faith.
I'm here to claim as mine this goodly woman
Whom I affirm, by Azraël who slayeth,
Was bought from him whom once more I do summon."
Then made he other sign
With fingers nine.

But, "Listen," Ali cried in musical
Fine scholar-phrases like the texts of Koran,
"To Jew and Christian, Moslem, Hindu, all
The tribes of man on coasts however foreign
My Gospel speaks. I cry the name of God,
The one high God of Moses, Christ, Mohammed,
Yet differently. He lives in every clod
As well as souls for diamond beauty famèd.
Creator—thus alone
Can he be known.

"Seven ways he shows existenee. For which seven
Seven Arabic letters stand. These are on earth
Mere pale reflections of the signs in heaven
He placed to chronicle creation's birth.
Force, Power and Will are seen in sun, moon, Mars;
In Mercury Action; Jove means Condescension;
Glory in Venus; by that sage of stars,
Old Saturn, Revelation first had mention.
These are to men and brutes
His Attributes.

"Last night with her, my adopted sister, friend
And true disciple I beheld the vision
Of Nimrod and, till darkness was at end,
Heard a strange tale of Ahram, whose old mission
Was like to mine, like to Mohammed's, like
To that sweet Christ's, whom Israel crucified;
And then once more I felt that me shall strike
A similar fate, that briefly I shall bide
Within the incarnate span
Of mortal man.

" In Koufa's moldering mosque, where bled to death
Ali the martyr, I was early witness
In vision of the saint who for the faith
Died which to those rude days had special fitness.
Methought I saw him hacked and disemboweled,
And a clear sound that seemed the lightning's voice
A like reward to the reformer voweled,
Whereat the foolish should once more rejoice,
Ignorant toward what seed
The martyrs bleed.

" But my great mission shall not be in vain,
We're God's own ; he is ours ; from him we borrow
Our wondrous robe of fleshly joy and pain—
And lay it back within the chest to-morrow.
He is unique, moveless, eterne, unseen.
None is but he. But I his prophet latest
Share that great glory with my saints eighteen
Whereof one is a woman. Thou that statest
Wise Gourred is a slave
Dost merely rave.

"She is so high above all women other
That when she dies of some terrific death
Her soul shall kindle in another Mother
Of Purity, and our eternal faith
Live on through persecutions! . . . O high Gate
With sevenfold arch, through which the godhead enters
And lo, the world! . . . O God-breaths early and late—
Each one a prophet in whose teaching centres
Some truth, to oversoar
One barrier more! . . ."

So speaking, deeply the rapt prophet pondered
At the divan, nor was aware of aught
But his great subject, and still on had wandered
Back had not him the hoary Dervish brought:
"Hamsa the Kadi! surely this is one
By look and speech of lofty race and learning.
I marvel that the case was e'er begun.
Dismiss it, and direct the Jew, for spurning
True Moslem, first restore
The chain she wore.

"And recompense this pretty boy, my son,
Who in your service beat his feet all bloody.
Ah viper!" rose his voice, "hereafter shun
Plots of such scope, or you shall stake your body!
Raven of ill that ere the dawn hast tried
To filch this treasure; wolf in cunning; greedy
As boar, and crafty as the fox; cool-eyed
Tenacious as chameleons! a speedy
Reward shall you obtain
But nothing gain!

"Two-colored as the pie, and doglike fawning,
False as sheet-lightning and as locust swift,
You shall regret, ere comes another dawning,
Lies have been husbanded with such unthrift.
Think you a Kadi such as this could fail
To see she was no slave, nor ever bartered
For aught at all? Think you the crazy tale
Will credence get? Or are you of those chartered
Liars who are believed
By men deceived?" . . .

Then as in vain the Jew to stop him struggled—
"Make way" he cried, "let these unchallenged pass!
Come, boy, and show the Kadi what you smuggled
O'er hill and dale, through sands and river-grass!
And since I'm poor, and this my son is fair,
Young and straight-limbed, but torn and stained
with travel,
O, all ye true believers, do not spare
Your wealth, but give of largess, and unravel
The knots that spoil the grace
Of his sweet face!"

A merry humor twinkled in the eye
Of that sad boy as with an eel-like motion
He ran from man to man. His courteous cry
Was scholarly and pressing. Now devotion
To thoughts sublime had kept the Prophet there,
Had Gourred not with dignity departed.
He followed; on their way each head was bare
Some even kissed the skirt of him who smarted
Still from the cruel blows
Of former foes.

And many a gift they had that morn received
From Hand-of-Sultan, in the boy did gather.
For all the Kadi's radiant look perceived
And his good luck, they hoped, their own would father;
And with deep groans the slaver doled a pile
Of silver, and the judge, not long entreated,
Gave a rich ring and gained a beaming smile.
Then at a nod the laughing youngster flitted
Off, and the Dervish sate
Serene, sedate.

"Come, Holy Father," quoth the Kadi then,
"Undo thy bag and show to all each jewel
For me brought, Hamsa, Kadi, chief of men!
To good men gracious, to the wicked cruel!
I marvel whence they are; from Ispahan?
(Poor uncle, are you dead?) Or my decisions—
Have they so pleased rich men of Hamadan
They send me gifts? I too have had my visions:
They were of much more gold
Than hands could hold!"

Serene he smiled, that Dervish, and his beard
Gently caressed. "Jewels are here," he muttered,
"Richer than any you have seen or heard
Cited in song or e'er in elf-tales uttered.
Look but on this!" . . . and from the sack he drew
A little scroll and read: *The life is short*
Of the voracious beast. . . The scroll he threw
Into the judge's lap. "Heard you report
Of pearl," asked he, "more rare,
More rich, more fair?

"And see this diamond: *He who digs a pit*
For others often falls therein!" . . . Scroll second
Fell on the Kadi's robe. But him a fit
Of fury strangled, for he saw he'd reckoned
Without his host. He rolled his greedy eyes
Like swine in yard tormented, toward the mocker
In helpless wrath, o'ercome by quick surprise.
Grotesque he leaned and goggling, like the knocker
Of bronze Franks mould like boars
To deck their doors.

Now when the keen-eyed Dervish saw returning
Speech, and the thundercloud about to burst,
Quoth he: "I fear my jewels you are spurning.
Yet here is *Take no bribe* among the first.
But hush, no word! I have within my budget
News that ye dream not:—THE GREAT SULTAN'S DEAD!
Ha, there is news! nor do I longer grudge it.
Fly Jew and Kadi! Ruffians, fly! o'erhead
Hang the long-treasured blows
Of lifelong foes!

"Hillah's in secret ferment and conspiring
With shut bazaar! Bad news flies fast! The road
To Bagdad is beset! Hear ye that firing?
Old bloodfeuds knock for you at each abode!" . . .
He said no more, for at the signal shot
The whole divan—Jew, Kadi, Arabs—tumbled
Out from the court, as though upon the spot
Where devils dance they had unwitting stumbled;
And while each hurried fast
Forth slowly passed

The Dervish blithe, and presently discovered
A ruinous house, apart, and foul to see,
But entering, there he found a carpet covered
Before the fountain with a banquet free,
With wine and coffee, fruits and tender meats,
Succulent roots and all that warms the senses,
And there his well-robed boy the Dervish greets.
Then down they sit and banquet like to princes,
Quaff and drown care with sups
From oft-drained cups.

Against the outer gate there was a knocking.
Behold, 'twas Gourred, seeking for the seer
Asylum. Lo, and there the Dervish, mocking
With goodly feast his piety austere!
"Well met," he cried, "Come to the banquet; bless
Allah who cast me in your way this morning.
Your theory's fine, but give me worldliness!
Ho, boy, more wine! Nay, Prophet, be not scorning
Safety, good food, and cheer!
You see me here

"The only man in Hillah cool and happy.
And why? Because with twice-filed tongue I've drawn
That juice from wood time-seasoned both and sappy—
I mean the gold fools hold for me in pawn!
I have no house for which to tremble. Taxes
I levy; never pay them. And the star
I worship best is that which wanes and waxes
Reflected in the wine from yonder jar.
The round heaven of my soul
Is you, O bowl!"

Then Ali woke as one who starts from dreams
And found sweet Gourred going. "It is fated,"
Quoth he, "this frank deceiver, who now seems
Only for fleshly vanities created,
Shall zealous be for our great faith beyond
All others; who, in his mere sport and leisure
Freed you and me from insult and from bond,
Shall find in martyrdom his keenest pleasure.
Sit we, and seek to gain
This master brain!"

So, while all Hillah is aquake with fears—
Each gun at rest, who's Sultan no one knowing—
These earnest sit till the lean moon appears
Yellowing apace while the night's breath is blowing.
The Prophet rose: "I rank you now as one
Of mine, though obstinate. My teaching ponder.
For as each comet to the hearth of sun
Returns at last, how far soe'er he wander,
You, O most deep and bold,
Shall join our fold.

"We must depart to comfort Nimrod worried
By fearful crimes. We can no longer stay.
Perchance we ne'er shall meet on earth. Yet Gourred
And I shall love you, though from far away.
Meantime, farewell my brother martyr! When
At your grim hour of trial flames are lapping
Your weary feet, hold fast in memory then
How on this day the grace of God was wrapping
You—thus I say, select—
You, the elect!" . . .

They passed as pass the roebuck and the hind
Shapely, deep-eyed, a perfect man and woman.
The Dervish pondered. All the world seemed rind
Without the melon; all our pleasures human
Stale; then a horror of his former life
Of naught and naughtiness with power possessed him—
The folly, groping and the aimless strife—
Till half he had of shallowness confessed him.
So, brooding on God, he paced
Forth to the waste.

THE EPILOGUE

THE EPILOGUE

Farewell, sweet friends. The kernel of the tale
Shows not in books, nor is at shops for sale.
The frame around about is history learned
From scholar-statesman Gobineau, who earned
Honors enough from his fair Mother France.
Reckless is she, yet eager for advance
In arts and letters—Genius with a torch
That radiates clearly from her pillared porch
Central among old Europe's varied fanes!

The fate of the reformer thus contains
Fates of old Nimrod, as in Chinese box
Carved by slow craftsmen without lids or locks
An inner form of kindred shape is seen.
I give you symbols. For whate'er has been
Exists to-day in those two caskets strange,
This earth and our smooth brain; nor out of range
Are future marvels in behind the eye
And here below the blue skull of the sky.

Now should ye long to know the second trance
Of wailing ghosts and all the sad romance
Of Ali and his Gourred—who more glad
Than Charles de Kay? But should ye find it bad,
Right well he can console himself, be sure;
Blithely your censure or neglect endure;
And ne'er regret the days of thankless toil
And fruitless spending of the midnight oil
Risked on the chance his country's folk to please.

For poets sing like wind among the trees
Now high, then low; now sweetly, then most ill;
And as, to writing, there is need of quill
And paper too; as wind is naught sans leaves;
Even so the singer who no praise receives
Is pen sans paper; breeze sans tree; a hand
Without the harp; a king that lacks of land;
A nerveless lion; a trustee disgraced;
An actor mouthing grandly toward the waste.

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